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# Selling the Beat, Visualizing the Rhythm: MTV, Propaganda Films, and Convergent Media in the 1980s

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# Selling the Beat, Visualizing the Rhythm:
# MTV, Propaganda Films, and Convergent Media in the 1980s

**by**

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# Dedication

Dedicated to my family and closest companions: Mom, Dad, Jason, Daryan, Byron, Matt, Nick, The Crew, and Harvey.

Special thanks to my academic mentors and peers in the Media Studies department and beyond, who have provided the support and encouragement to undertake this project and grow as both a scholar and a person.

In loving memory of Aida Lugo.

# Abstract

## Selling the Beat, Visualizing the Rhythm: MTV, Propaganda Films, and Convergent Media in the 1980s

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In the early 1980s, American media industries were changing at a rapid pace. New technologies and corporate structures influenced a new crop of media content indicative of an ever-diversifying mediascape. Influenced by this continuing evolution, the Warner-Amex corporation developed a platform to showcase a new kind of content form, music videos, that sought to mix the flow of radio broadcast with filmed popular music entertainment: MTV, music television. MTV stood as the go-to source for music videos in the United States and became a cultural touchstone in itself. The cable, recording, and advertising industries all had a hand in the channel's development and had to overcome the industrial tensions such an initiative would bring. How would profits be earned? Who produces what? And where will the money come from? Despite its successful premiere on August 1 1981, MTV still underwent a number of transformations, both industrially and culturally, to become the media giant it still is today. One result of this platform's rise in prominence was a need to produce content that would fit well on this new-look channel. Seeing this opportunity, a group of filmmakers

formed Propaganda Films in 1986 in order to produce music videos and television advertisements for MTV and other broadcast platforms. These filmmakers, including Hollywood auteurs Steve Golin, Nigel Dick, Dominic Sena, and David Fincher, would have a profound influence on music videos and television advertisements, bringing a distinctive style and authorial vision to non-feature film Hollywood productions. My research details the formation of MTV, the founding of Propaganda Films, and the formal components of Propaganda's music videos and television advertisements as a means to engage the convergent trends of American media industries during this period. Propaganda Films, a prolific and repeatedly well-regarded organization in the entertainment industry, has yet to have a comprehensive scholarly analysis of its involvement in American media history. My aim is to simultaneously detail a previously underrepresented historical case while providing an interdisciplinary means in which to engage various content forms that are an important component of our media-making cultures and traditions.

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# Introduction

In 1986, a cadre of young filmmakers - Steve Golin, Jani Sighvatsson, Greg Gold, Nigel Dick, Dominic Sena, and David Fincher – founded Propaganda Films, a film production company that ultimately produced hundreds of music videos for top recording artists between 1986 and 2000. Propaganda utilized its filmmaking talent to produce an assortment of content in three primary media forms: music videos, television advertisements, and feature films. From 1986 to 1991, when Polygram Entertainment acquired the company, Propaganda produced scores of music videos for Madonna, Janet Jackson, Guns N' Roses, Paula Abdul, Tina Turner, and Billy Idol. Their commercials also made a splash in the industry, winning a number of awards including multiple Cannes Lions, one of the more respectable honors in the advertising industry.[1] The company's output would fit the moniker of "high concept," which scholar Justin Wyatt described as "one result of the tension between the economics and aesthetics on which commercial studio filmmaking is based." From Fincher's "Smoking Fetus" PSA for the American Cancer Society (the title adequately describes the content) to Dominic Sena's "Nike Heritage" commercial for Nike, the company produced slick and stark imagery for products and brands. These images were the result of commercial dealings with a number of media industries, including the cable industry, the recording industry, the advertising industry, and the film industry. Thus, Propaganda Films stands as a quintessential example of media-convergent practices typical of the 1980s in the United States and around the world.

The film industry was entering a new stage in its own development, transforming into an industry that actively diversified its output. "As a result of these transformations, Hollywood ceased operating as a film industry," states scholar Stephen Prince. "Instead

of making films, the industry shifted to the production of filmed entertainment, a quite different enterprise that encompassed the production and distribution of entertainment in a variety of markets and media."[2] The commercial aspects of this type of venture were not lost on Propaganda's founders. "I came up with the name Propaganda," claims founder Dominic Sena. "I thought, *That's what we're doing, we're selling propaganda*."[3] However, Sena's sense of Propaganda was not political but capitalistic, a promotion of products that heralded a consumer culture spurred by new forms of media.

Scholar Tim Dwyer views media convergence as "the process whereby new technologies are accommodated by existing media and communication industries and cultures."[4] This process details the intersections of distinct media and information technology systems that had previously been though of as separate and self-contained. For MTV's creation, distinct systems were cable operators, record labels, and advertisers. Italian scholar Leopoldina Fortunatti speaks of a process in which these convergent practices simultaneously unify media and yet at the same time promote diversification.[5] Such changes are not merely a summation of these various components, but exponential or emergent.[6] These observations are to point out that the complex, evolutionary, adaptive, and organic processes at stake within MTV's development. It is not simply a "media-building" site, but a dynamic and vibrant locale for continued changes and tensions between producers, media distributers, and the audience itself.[7] My research seeks to highlight these tensions and developments keeping this industrial convergent framework in mind.

The tensions between the cable industry, the record industry, and the advertising industry were typical of new trends in industrial structure, but they were ultimately alleviated in light of a slow-to-come but inevitable success. Music video's promotional nature fit well along side the television advertisement's own capitalistic methods. The

"MTV style" of many music video productions would ultimately influence television advertisement's own formal elements, as I will discuss in the last chapter. Such developments blurred the line between music videos and television ads, where a "MTV-style" would come to define much of television advertising in the late 80s and early 90s. My chronicling of MTV's creation speaks more of the industrial nature of these trends. Convergent practices that emerged during the late-70s and early-80s, such as that of a video-radio station for the then-new cable television platform, continue to play a legitimizing role in media industry strategies and policy making.[8] That being said, it is hard to ignore the cultural impact of a network like MTV and nearly impossible to separate those influences from industrial practice, as evidenced by the criticisms of MTV lacking diversity and the station's eventual diversification after the success of Michael Jackson's "Thriller" music video.

Propaganda's work in both music video and advertisement productions enabled its filmmakers to promote their own careers in terms of both their technical and conceptual strengths. They also promoted a valuable ability of mixing provocative imagery with commercial branding, showcasing a product or service with a cohesive and distinctive vision. Beginning in 1986, Propaganda enabled pop artists to sell their music, directors to sell their style, and the company as a whole to sell its content – music videos, feature films, and commercials – to an industry seeking new forms of filmed entertainment in both television and cinema. Propaganda's position in American entertainment industry history begins to undermine a tendency to place these concepts firmly into a Hollywood feature-filmmaking discourse. Music videos and commercials are produced and constructed with methods and traditions developed by an established American film industry. But must this narrative incorporate the complexities of multiple media platforms and changing forms of cinematic style? How do these texts utilize aesthetics to convey

commercial success through a trusted brand? My thesis addresses these questions and provides a potential framework in which to approach music videos and television advertisements of this period, providing additional perspectives to the already complicated narrative of American filmed entertainment throughout the 1980s and the beginning of the next decade.

I begin by chronicling of MTV's development as a result of convergent practices between various media industries and how such a platform would enable a company like Propaganda to succeed in the music video and television advertisement industries simultaneously. I will discuss particular factors of industrial convergence within the cable, recording, and advertising industries utilizing a variety of scholars who have specialized in these subjects' interactions, such as William Kunz in *Culture Conglomerates: Consolidation in the Motion Picture and Television Industry* (2007), Raymond Williams in *Television – Technology and Cultural Forum* (2003), and Thomas Baldwin, D. Stevens McCoy, and Charles Steinfeld's collaborative study in *Convergence: Integrating Media, Information, & Communications* (1996). These scholars give light to certain practices, such as budgeting and marketing, and their effects on other industries. MTV was susceptible to these market changes and its success stems from the ability to adapt to these trends.

Unlike Propaganda Films, which had very little documented about its formation and creation in academic literature, MTV has had a number of comprehensive historical narratives constructed. These historiographies come in various forms, whether orally, such as Robert Sam Wilson's "Birth of an MTV Nation" (2000) and Craig Marks and Robert Tannenbaum's *I Want My MTV: The Uncensored Story of the Music Video Revolution* (2011), analytically, Kevin William's *Why I [Still] Want My MTV,* 2003; E. Ann Kaplan's *Rocking Around the Clock* (1987), or industrially like R. Serge Denisoff's

incredibly detailed *Inside MTV* (1988). Each of these works primarily focuses on the group of individuals, led by Michael Pittman, who founded and developed MTV's launch in 1981. My own aim is to meld these varying perspectives together while framing them within the aforementioned convergent literature. In order to transfer this analytic framework towards the particular platforms of Hollywood-produced music videos and commercials, the work of Stephen Prince's excellent chronicling of the decade in *A New Pot of Gold: Hollywood Under the Electric Rainbow, 1980 – 1989* (2002), Justin Wyatt's *High Concept* (1994), Kevin Williams' *Why I [Still] Want My MTV* (2003), Saul Austerlitz's *Money for Nothing: A History of Music Video* (2007), and Harold Vogel's *Entertainment Industry Economics: A Guide for Financial Analysis* (1998) clarifies how music videos function as promotional material.

For the final chapter's formal analysis, my conceptual framework and analytic ideology are partially inspired by the work of David Bordwell, Kristin Thompson, and Janet Staiger in *The Classical Hollywood Cinema: Film Style & Mode of Production to 1960* in that this survey of Propaganda Film's various texts hopes to argue for a "coherent system whereby aesthetic norms and the mode of film production reinforced one another."[9] Like Bordwell, Staiger, and Thompson, my analysis involved watching dozens of music videos and television advertisements to glean a cohesive mode of style - a style largely reflective of a filmmaking vision that promotes both Propaganda notoriety and a pop star's album sales. Analyses of these texts' formal qualities during this period are notably absent from academic discourse, *especially* for music videos and television advertising. Roland Marchand's work in *Advertising the American Dream: Making Way for Modernity, 1920-1940* provides a foundational theorization of the power of thematic imagery in conveying capitalism through cultural cues. For music videos, Carol Vernallis - one of the few scholars who has written a book-length study on music video aesthetics –

engages the medium as both a musical and a cinematic text, creating a new aura in which musicality, discontinuity, and star-power operate to create a new form of motion-picture viewing. Her book's title, *Experiencing Music Videos,* highlights the idea of "experience." With a background in music theory and history, Vernallis claims music comes "first – the song is produced before the video is conceived – and the director normally designs images with the song as guide."[10] My work will rarely touch on the composition and structure of popular music in the 80s, and I will argue that music videos not only "follow" (to use Vernallis' phrase) a song but also incorporate non-musical aesthetics and other formal attributes to generate their own modes of stylization. Thus, I challenge Vernallis' view that music video visuals "follow" the music. Rather, visuals often create their own narratives in which the music is but one factor of a music video's aesthetic components. I will apply this form of formal analysis to Propaganda's television advertisements as well in order to emphasize the cohesive nature of the company's output.

The final two chapters on Propaganda Films will cover the period between 1986 and 1991. The basis for this bracketing is twofold. First, it corresponds to Propaganda's stance as an independent producer, where its prolific production of music videos and advertisements garnered acclaim from the recording and advertising industries as the go-to production company. The second basis is that 1991 was the year in which Propaganda was purchased by Polygram as a means to expand Polygram's media making capabilities beyond recorded music, ending the company's independence from a larger media organization. Through a mixture of industrial and formal analysis, I hope to chart Propaganda Films' corporate history, structures, and creative output, a subject that has had very little to no attention in American film and entertainment literature, both scholarly and popular.

My plan is to utilize varying theoretical frameworks - historiographical, industrial, and formal - to detail how MTV and Propaganda Films exemplified the transformative and convergent trends of the American media industry during the 1980s. In doing so, I will engage a variety of texts across multiple media platforms and place them within the context of these organization's active attempts to make waves in the industry and promote their own brand image. This will enable my scholarship to account for the inherent mixture of aesthetic style and commercial strategies that go hand-in-hand with the traditions of American filmmaking during the period. My observations of Propaganda's use of style in its music videos and television advertisements will contextualize a formal approach within an industrial discourse. A study of Propaganda's oeuvre, which can only begin to touch on how scholars may analyze music videos and television advertisements in general, must address the dual nature of these works – as both visual text and branding strategy.

My research incorporates a diverse set of methods, namely discursive, formal, and qualitative analysis. To engage the discourse at the time, I studied a variety of trade press publications, including *Variety, Billboard, Advertising Age,* and *Forbes* amongst others. Also national publications such as *The New York Times, The Los Angeles Times,* and *USA Today*, allude to Propaganda's success in the industry. These sources often describe Propaganda with flattering monikers, such as being "the only real brand" in the music video and television commercial business.[11] However, defining the exact make-up of Propaganda's output has proven difficult. A quick search through a number of online databases indicates little about the history and particulars of Propaganda's completed projects. For instance, there is no single source detailing its definitive filmography. Even comprehensive websites such as IMDb fail to have incomplete listings of the studio's output.[12] The most useful sources have been interviews with producers Steve Golin, Joni

Sighvatsson, Dominic Sena, and Nigel Dick conducted over the past decade, many of them conducted after Propaganda's closure in 1999. For this project, I have formulated my own curated sample of Propaganda's content from a variety of sources, including IMDb and other fan-curated sites such as FincherFanatic.com, and mvdbase.com, and by personal accounts of Propaganda's employees via their personal websites or various interviews.

Finally, my analysis incorporates a number of interviews with Propaganda's employees I myself have conducted. While my access to filmmakers David Fincher, Dominic Sena, Steve Golin and Joni Sighvatsson has been extremely limited, I have been able to speak to a couple of Propaganda's employees, notably director Nigel Dick and film editor Michael Heldman. Both filmmakers were willing to discuss their roles in Propaganda's structure and give detail on the company's make-up and culture. These interviews contribute to a much-needed chronicling of Propaganda's initial history and fill some of the holes in the company's notable but rarely detailed narrative during this early period.

My thesis is comprised of three chapter. Chapter 1 details MTV's formation as a site of industrial convergence. While the televized promotion of commercial music was by no means a new phenomenon in American media, broadcasted music videos stood at the intersection of the cable, recording, and advertising industries. MTV's formation was the result of managing the tensions between these converging industries though the music video, or "music clip" as they were called in 1981. Often, as I will detail in the following chapters, MTV oversaw what content would fit a broadcast ideology of non-overt commercialization. In 1983, Michael Jackson's "Thriller" music video raised the standards of music video production with its higher budget and direct involvement with Hollywood filmmakers.[13] This set a precedent for a new more elaborate method of

producing music videos, a method Propaganda would utilize in the later half of the decade. My discursive analysis will utilize press and trade publications from the mid-eighties to highlight how the entertainment industry responded to these trends. Also, I will utilize a variety of secondary sources to give theoretical frameworks to these convergent and analysis them industrially as textual, cultural, and commercial product.

Chapter 2 profiles the founders of Propaganda Films, its formation, and functions through its first five years as a company. I will detail various components of Propaganda's business model – including the founder's strategy for entering the industry, maintaining a steady stream of income and projects, and production practices. While Propaganda's work deploys kinetic and visually striking depictions of brand culture and popular culture, I am interested in the inner-working of such an organization. Extremely little has been written about Propaganda's early production, budget, distribution practices, and company culture. Propaganda is often discussed vaguely through ideological ideas of how the company took part in various industries and how it blazed a trail other organizations later followed. My aim is to depict what happened *inside* Propaganda, rather than how Propaganda influenced the outside world. For the production process in particular, I will detail the making of one of Propaganda's high-profile music videos: Nigel Dick's music video for Guns 'n Roses' "Welcome to the Jungle" based primarily on an interview I conducted with the director for this project.

In Chapter 3, I will conduct a formal analysis of Propaganda's music videos and television advertisements between 1986 and 1991. In doing so, I will be expanding on the various formal "modes of style" utilized by a Propaganda's filmmakers to simultaneously make themselves and their pop star clients stand out amongst the exponentially growing medium of music video production. I will begin with a discussion on how music videos are traditionally analyzed, either as a product of MTV's presence

on cable television or as a simple extension of a particular song, a supplementary visual component of an audial text. With MTV being such an influential presence, the history of music videos often directly stems from that particular channel's history in cable broadcasting: the creation of the VJ, the continuous flow of music video programming, and the establishment of events like the MTV Video Music Awards. This history is often placed under the discursive structure of popular music and music theory. I hope to approach these works visually and formally. In viewing these videos, we can then see aesthetic methods utilized by a *group* of filmmakers rather than varying aesthetics of individual artists. In other words, a formal reading of Propaganda's provides aesthetic the results of the structural and procedural detailing outlined in Chapter 2. My analysis will detail what I found to be the most prevalent formal components in Propaganda's videography: lighting, editing, production design, and casting.

An engagement with Propaganda's industrial makeup and its formal aesthetics begins to account for music video's and television advertisement's place in American film history. As evidenced by Propaganda's continued aspirations to be a feature-film company, these forms of content were a component of a strategy of placing itself within the highly competitive American movie market.[14] Certain components of Propaganda's narrative confirm this trajectory, where forms of marketing and branding serve to promote multiple agents - from a group of aspiring filmmakers to already established companies and recording artists. Propaganda's work in music videos and television advertisements incorporated a cinematic style into broadcasted content. MTV was a large part of this melding, but Propaganda's position as a production company enabled its employees to venture out beyond the norms of broadcasted content. Its filmmakers' continued, if varied, success in later decades speaks to the pervasiveness of their strikingly visual style.[15] Though I am hesitant to proclaim Propaganda's heavy influence

on the American entertainment industry as a whole, it is hard to deny the subsequent rise of a "cool cinema" aesthetic of the nineties, as addressed by Perren's work in *Indie Inc.,* namely the American independent cinema lead by filmmakers like Steven Soderbergh, Quentin Tarantino, and Spike Lee, where the mixing of marketing, popular music, and blockbuster filmmaking enable a divergent modes of franchising.

Finally, the history of Propaganda Films corresponds to my own personal trajectory as fan, scholar, and critic. My fandom stems from not only the pleasure of viewing Propaganda's works but also relating that pleasure to the systems of production that shape it. I believe that a deeper understanding of these systems bring insightful depth to my own media-watching past. As Matt Hills suggests, academia is "nevertheless bounded by its own [certain type of] *imagined subjectivity*" where perceived values indicate a faithfulness deployed by the scholar.[16] I trust that my insight can correlate with others' own relationship with popular culture and inspire continued engagement with fellow fans and scholars alike in accessing Propaganda's place in filmed entertainment's own history. My intentions are scholarly, but ultimately subject to personal enthusiasm for music and images I hold dear. I hope to share these insights, instilled with my fandom, in a comprehensive yet compelling manner.

*Introduction Endnotes*

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[8] Tim Dwyer, *Media Convergence*, (New York City: Open University Press, 2010), 10

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[11] Quoted in Jim Hamas, "The Rise and Fall of Propaganda," *Advertising Age*, Accessed April 17 2015, December 1 2001, http://adage.com/article/beat-sheet/rise-fall-propaganda/92280/

[12] "Propaganda Films [us]." *IMDb*. IMDb.com, n.d. Web. 23 Nov. 2014.

[13] American filmmaker John Landis for "Thriller." (*Kentucky Fried Movie* , 1977; *Animal House,* 1978; *Blues Brothers,* 1980)

[14] Anonymous Content's model is strikingly similar to Propaganda's, witch talented filmmakers – including the now film-auteur David Fincher – producing music videos, commercials, and feature films.

[13] Aside from the rise of David Fincher's stance as acclaimed American filmmaker with his movies *Seven* (1995), *The Game* (1997), and *Fight Club* (1999), directors Dominic Sena and Michael Bay also had huge hits in the subsequent decade (Sena's *Gone in Sixty Seconds,* 2000 and Bay's *Bad Boys,* 1995; *The Rock,* 1996; *Armageddon,* 1998)

[14] Matt Hills, *Fan Cultures*. (London: Psychology Press, 2002)

# Chapter 1:

## TV in Stereo: *MTV as a Site of Convergence*

In fall 1980, 26-year-old Bob Pittman already had some success as a programmer for the Warner-Amex Satellite Entertainment Company. Two years prior, Pittman helped the newly formed company – a result of American Express buying out half of Warner Cable – debut The Movie Channel, a station that utilized the programming and economic benefits of feature-film syndication to create a cable channel dedicated to at-home movie viewing.[1] After The Movie Channel's initial success, the company wanted to create another network with Pittman again overseeing programming. "I had done a TV show on NBC called *Album Tracks,* which ran after *Saturday Night Live*," said Pittman in 2010, "which played a little bit of music videos, some music news. So I pitched the idea of, 'Let's do a video radio station.'"[2] Pittman's supervisor, John Lack, a former radio executive at CBS and a self-identified "major rock 'n' roller" loved the idea, and actually considered a similar station on his own. Lack backed Pittman, a former radio programmer as well, to be a new producer for the channel. Lack agreed that a radio programmer's sensibility would be necessary for this new-look channel. First, Pittman and Lack had to contend with Jack Schneider, CEO of Warner-Amex and former president of CBS. Schneider was reluctant to hire Pittman as a programmer citing his limited television experience. "They had [CBS television producer] Mike Dann on retainer, so they send me to see Mike. Mike interviews me, calls Jack Schneider up, and says, 'Yes, he can do the job. You should hire this kid.'"[3] Finally, Schneider agreed to Pittman's involvement, hired him as head-programmer, and the new project was officially underway.

The next months had Pittman gathering a team of young aspiring broadcasters and marketers including John Sykes and Tom Freston, a former ad-man and Epic Records

promoter respectively. By December 1980, the team featuring Pittman, Lack, Freston, and Sykes was ready to make its proposal to the Warner-Amex board. Though confident, they were worried about the board's most conservative member, Atlanta-bred C.E.O. of American Express, James Robinson III. Schneider was an export in dealing with executive-types and led off with describing the general concept. Anticipating hesitation towards rock-and-roll music programming, the team played the most "plain-vanilla" clips[4] of music performances, including Olivia Newton-John and Kris Kristofferson. At one point, Robinson asked Warner Entertainment CEO Steve Ross about where the channel would get this new "music clip" material. "Oh, that's no problem," Robinson remembers Ross responding. "Every time one of these rock groups creates a new album, [record labels] do a video clip and give it away as promotion." Robinson was thrilled about the "no cost" aspect of the deal. "We committed in the first two minutes," Robinson claims. "They had to spend the next 45 convincing their sister company why this is a good idea."[5] After some continued reluctance, Steve Ross told a simple anecdote about his daughter. "She said I ought to do it, so I'm going to do it." The channel's financial backing was now secure.

As the cable launch rapidly approached, the team still was not satisfied with what to call the station. The station was referred to as "TVM" initially, but the name still did not sit right with Pittman and his crew. Then during one brainstorming session in the weeks leading up to the channel's premiere, music promoter Steve Casey said dryly, "How about *MTV*…doesn't that sound better [than TVM]?" Though the suggestion was not meet with the most enthusiastic response, everyone agreed that even if it did not *sound* much better, it certainly *looked* better. "So everybody goes, "Yeah, MTV. That sounds better!"[6] recalled Michael Pittman about the meeting. So TVM quickly transformed into MTV, Music Television, just in time for its August 1 debut.

## MTV AND CONVERGENCE

Through relations between multiple industries, MTV became a site indicative of convergent trends in the entertainment industry and the new practices such trends influenced. This chapter hopes to speak towards scholar John Mundy's description of the development of 20th century media-entertainment as a "managing of tensions" between a variety of industrial structures.[7] These structures had been long established as commercial ventures where capitalistic sentiments have been present for generations.[8] The term "convergence" has three principal clusters of meaning, according to scholar Graham Murdock: *convergence of cultural forms,* or the'grand fusion' of multimedia; *convergence of communication systems,* pertaining to the manipulable utilization of media technologies; and *convergence of corporate ownership,* as an "economic and organizational phenomenon recognizable at the level of corporate strategy and structure."[9] My research largely pertains towards the third definition of convergence, yet the other two are inherently linked to such strategies and practices.

Profit has been a fundamental objective for such ventures, and MTV's own development indicates aspirations that seek to achieve initial and continued financial success in markets that have previously been delineated. In other words, Warner-Amex hoped to tap into the recording industry in order to provide a new from of music distribution suitable for its growing need for content. As E. Ann Kaplan describes, such commercialism is disguised only to a point. A better name for music videos, for example, would be "music promos," as the invisible authorship of the text - the director, the crew, and the record label that produce such content- are similar to the invisible authorship of advertising.[10] The most apparent promotion is for the recording artist, who hopes to sell records and gain a large audience. However, the underlying promotion is for the network, record labels, and the content producers behind the content. These varying industries

were the beneficiaries of mutual agreements within the MTV network. This chapter details these agreements. For Propaganda Films, these benefits would enable a new way to enter the industry. For the company's filmmakers, commercialism was a necessity, not an annoyance to overcome.

Once such a platform had been established, Propaganda Films could implement its own practices of bringing Hollywood sensibilities towards an increasingly visual music industry. As the opening anecdote indicates, the cooperation between various industries was shaky at best in the beginning. MTV's cultural prominence, which came slowly with continued adjustments in content and distribution, only began to occur when such ventures proved to be lucrative. This chapter sets the stage for Propaganda's development and success through MTV's own tensions with various industries and the resulting success from those tensions. Despite these eventual complications, convergence, as Henry Jenkins reminds us, "is primarily a technological process with brings together multiple media functions within the same devices."[11] In this narrative, the technological site for these tensions and evolutions is the television set. This particular technology, especially in terms of the mutli-channel transition, saw momentous transformations in on many levels, from corporate structures to audience demographics. This chapter ultimately argues that MTV was an essential and important site for Propaganda films and filmed entertainment as a whole.

In the late seventies and early eighties, the American entertainment industry was evolving rapidly. With cable television ending the paradigm of network television's hold on television, new cable and satellite stations provided a means in which to package and distribute new kinds of content for at-home viewing. And in terms of the cooperation between multiple media industries, the aforementioned pitch meeting, where Pittman and his colleagues had to justify their venture to a company that was the result of a merger

between a communications company (Warner Communications) and a financial services company (American Express) indicates that shifts had already begun in the industry's corporate structures. Conglomeration increased "the size and the financial, political, and market power of a corporation, but does not necessarily reduce competition."[12] New corporate conglomerates were continuously making efforts to advance their products and services via new technologies and new production methods in a competitive market. Companies like Warner Amex felt this change was a necessity. Coca-Cola, in a statement made after its purchase of Columbia Pictures in 1982, cited the "significant changes" occurring due to the "technological developments which have resulted in the availability of alternative forms of leisure time entertainment, including expanded pay and cable television, video cassettes, video discs and video games."[13]

Amanda Lotz speaks of the multi-channel transition that began during this period, and MTV is a direct result of that transition. Lotz states that new channels "changed the competitive dynamics of the industry" and what kinds of programming could be produced.[14] Audience targeting became more and more narrow with distributors and producers looking less and less to appeal to the entire family. Lotz acknowledges how diversification could lead to a polarized audience and how these contribute to a variety of cultural fissures.[15] These fissures occur within television-watching cultures, where the medium's influence on water-cooler conversation becomes diminished by such selective practices. Lotz's ideas are of course important for engaging viewership and communities as a whole, but I also argue that these fissures were also present within MTV's own development. It was these divides that gave Michael Pittman and his team difficulties in launching the station, because the powers that be in the Warner-Amex board room could not relate to the type of entertainment MTV would provide. For them, TV was for a mass audience. The idea that a rock and roll music video channel would succeed in a *mass*

communication industry was foreign to them. However, Pittman believed such a platform would work to draw new younger audiences. It also generated and developed a then-infant content form of music videos. This emergence was not instant but timely, and my research hopes to detail how music videos on television grew out of these industrial developments to become a medium notable enough for Propaganda to rely on.

MTV's first four years as a music video platform saw continued retooling and developments on several fronts, including expanding broadcast distribution, growing music industry involvement, and more progressive cultural diversity. For future music video production companies like Propaganda Films, MTV had to become a cultural staple in itself. This talent pool was not simply relegated to what MTV broadcast - musical artists performing and showcasing their own products - but also the VJs that tied the broadcasted flow together, the filmmakers who produced and directed the music videos, and the corporate entities that hoped to promote consumerist practices.

In the case of major entertainment industries, the hand of industry must always guide them even if that guidance is usually itself unsure of the content's eventual form. Even the pre-rock and roll form of classical Hollywood musicals dealt with a desire to find the right combination of sound and vision and turn that combination into success. As John Mundy wrote in regards to Hollywood at this time, "the successful development of the musical genre through the 1930s, and its huge popularity with audiences throughout the next two decades, depended precisely on the formal, thematic and ideological fusion of spectacle and narrative and on the management of the tensions which result."[16] In other words, industry manages the balance in an assortment of conceptual arenas, both formal and cultural. Technology is a particular conceptual arena that preceded MTV's creation, as I will discuss in terms of the Qube system's role in conceptualizing concepts of niche programing on cable systems. Popular music was but one form of cultural content ripe

enough for television broadcast distribution. Music videos then represent another site of this tension.

Mundy speaks of a relationship between the visual and the audial, an aesthetic duality of sight and sound. For music videos, such a simple description would fall severely short. When music videos are placed on a broadcast format lke MTV, such descriptions fall even shorter. For MTV and similar channels that followed, such as Nickelodeon, HBO, and the soon to be debuted Showtime, "the simple and supposed identity of forms (such as narrative, advertisement, and news report) and institutional oppositions (such as radio and television, program and commercial) are shattered, combined, and multiplied to the extent that singular distinctions and binary oppositions are rendered multiple and thus irrelevant."[17] While the "dualistic" nature of Mundy's classical Hollywood hopes to make those tensions invisible, music television's design exposes formatting indicative of broadcast media. For Michael Pittman and his producing team at MTV, rethinking the music on television model went beyond narrowcasting. It re-conceptualized how television was broadcast and received. Pittman suggested this in 1992:

> We're now seeing the TV become a component of the stereo system. It's ridiculous to think that you have two forms of entertainment – your stereo and your TV – which have nothing to do with one another. What we're doing is marrying those two forms so that they work together in unison. We're the first channel on cable to pioneer this…I think that what we've been doing up to now in cable has been dealing with forms that have already had some success on TV. MTV is the first attempt to make TV a new form, other than video games and data channels. We're talking about creating a new form using existing technologies.[18]

For Pittman, MTV was a retooling of the television set itself into a brand new form of a tele-aural-visual technology, a realization of television as a form of videography.[19] Of course, Pittman could easily say this in retrospect. The implications of this shift were

nothing but conjecture at the time of MTV's creation. Pittman and his crew had an idea that such a channel may work in this new industrial environment, but to what extent? The MTV of 1981 was not the MTV of 1985, let alone 1992. Even music video revolutions contain their own re-conceptualizations, reformations, and continued development. Music videos did not come to complete fruition on August 1, 1981. Their own cultural and aesthetic development had only just begun.

The first section of my analysis will focus on the three industries that converged through MTV's broadcast: the cable television industry, the record industry, and the advertising industry. Particularly, how these industries had to make accommodations to MTV's distribution strategies. As we will see, these industries had their own hesitance on MTV's broadcast model. These issues stemmed from concerns that were indicative of the period, particularly how MTV would curate its content and enable that curation to lead to continued financial success. Such issues arose prior to MTV's first broadcast and continued throughout its first years as a regional channel and then a national channel.

The next section will continue MTV's narrative from 1981 to 1984. Particularly, I will be detailing MTV's own expansion from suburban and rural markets towards bigger metropolitan areas, cementing its stance as the national source for music video content. Also, I discuss MTV's slow turn towards cultural diversification, where there was no African American artist's music video broadcast on the channel in its first couple of years. Michael Jackson's video for "Thriller" broke that barrier, and I will detail that video's production and subsequent success on MTV. "Thriller" not only stood as a big step towards the network's diversification, but also drastically altered the notion that music videos were just visual accompaniment to commercially viable songs. The video's production and content indicated the American film industry's strong influence on the music video medium and also elevated the music video as a viable media-form,

beginning the trends towards high-concept genre-driven bits of high-budget filmmaking that Propaganda would herald later in the decade. With this history in place, only then can we begin to understand Propaganda's position in this narrative. The trajectory of music videos on television begins with convergence cultures and continues with the constant evolution of media platform and content. MTV's story exemplifies how such developments occur.

**INDUSTRIES ALIGNED**

For Warner-Amex, the venture into music video programming began with new technology's abilities to expand cable-programming distribution. Broadcast cable technologies facilitated a "viewer's break from the network-era television experience"[20] and gave them increased control of which content he or she engaged. In the late seventies, Warner-Amex had been implementing new forms of technology on its own. The QUBE system, an early version of a cable guide that utilized hardware instead of software, enabled its users not only access to broadcasts of Warner's library (television shows, feature films, etc.) but enabled them to obtain that content *on demand*. The QUBE's development also brought hardware and software developers (data processers) within cable television's then growing industry. These new forms of production mixed in with more established industries of television broadcasters and record labels. This process is then greatly accelerated by the threat of competition in both market and technological development. Growth was necessary for continued success and companies with a history of independence were willing to partner with each other in order to exploit, as James D. Robinson III stated when announcing American Express' merger with Warners, "a compatible extension of our travel and entertainment-related services [that] gives us entry into the fast-growing, at home consumer and entertainment industry."[21] With QUBE,

Warner Communications had enabled a platform for the transmission of entertainment on a larger scale and with unprecedented interactivity. While technology was important to give MTV the ability to even be a party of the diversifying broadcast industry, it served as a starting point for the industrial changes to come win the next two years. These developments would prove to be highly influential for a number of industry's strategies of gaining new forms of profit. However, the new technological developments created holes that Warner-Amex hoped to fill within larger scope of cable broadcasting. What information to broadcast and for whom?

A year after its 1977 launch, Warner-Amex had begun developing new forms of network entertainment that stemmed from these technological developments. Michael Pittman's success with The Movie Channel utilized Warner's film library. But even with feature films, Pittman produced like a radio programmer. "I programmed The Movie Channel like a radio station," Pittman claimed. "I figured, Okay, these are the five most popular movies, I'm gonna show them twice a day. These are not so popular. I'm only gonna show them every four days."[22] The large expanse of Western popular music was an untapped source for television broadcasting, at least in the 24-hour radio-like stream that Pittman and his associates imagined. Popular music had of course had many moments on television, from the early broadcasts of Lawrence Welk to Ed Sullivan and Sonny and Cher. But unsurprisingly, cable operators were not necessarily concerned with content as much as the central aspects of the broadcasting industry: audiences and demographics. John Lack detailed the pitch at the aforementioned board meeting in 1980:

> See, the whole pitch to the board directors at WASEC had nothing to do with music videos. It had to do with demographics. At that point, there was no television aimed at the twelve- to thirty-four-year-old demographic. Half of the *Saturday Night Live* audience was over thirty-five. If you were an advertiser buying time on *Saturday Night Live* to reach young adults, half your money was wasted on thirty-five-plus. We said, if this music channel reaches twelve to thirty-

> four year olds, we can deliver an audience for advertisers they can't get through broadcast television. Cable providers would sign up new subscribers, because this would be available only on cable. We would sell second-set hookups because mothers and fathers would not allow this shit to be played in the living room: "Here's a TV, go play it in your own bedroom!"[23]

But such logic still didn't sit well with the board, who were still skeptical about the appeal of the station's content. Lack would later call the cable operators "pole climbers," men who were engineers first above all else. "They didn't know original programming,"[24] he would conclude. Andy Orgel, then Vice President for affiliate sales and marketing under CEO Jack Schneider conveyed his own experience after the pitch:

> "So," I said, after I finished my pitch, "what do you think?" And there was total silence. Finally, one guy got up and said, "Now, if you sold me a channel of country music that really reflects America, I'd put that on—but I'm not going to put this on." Right then, we knew we had our work cut out for us.[25]

Pittman, Lack, and their fellow music television heralds needed to prove that such content was necessary and warranted towards a cable industry that would much rather place another sports channel than something that pertained to rock-and-roll. But even in light of this reluctance, the group faced challenges from multiple fronts. Again, an assortment of industries needed to align for MTV to transform from a hope to a reality, and the reception from one of those industries, the music business, was only slightly warmer than their broadcast cable counterparts.

In the late 1970s, the recording industry was going through a slump in record sales. From 1979 to 1980, sales of recorded music in the US market dropped 10.4%, which amounted to a value-based sales drop of 11%.[26] Some blamed the disco genre, which received a lot of backlash through the "disco sucks" rhetoric that was catching on around the country. However, disco was not alone in the expanding popular music landscape. New sub-cultures expanded in the 70s and new music styles expanded with it. Country & Western, punk rock, fusion jazz, heavy metal, hip-hop, and a number of

different forms of electronic music also underwent their own increase in popularity. This segmented the market as tastes began to diversify. Music consumers welcomed this trend, as did the record companies that increasingly produced and distributed music for niche audiences. This is parallel to cable television's own diversification of content for broader audiences, a la the QUBE system's array of various content. But when market segments then became smaller and smaller the profit margins became smaller and smaller with it. A system geared towards maximizing profit saw its profit margins decreasing. Thus, record industries began a new strategy of reducing the artist roster on major labels and began limiting their reach into smaller market samples.[27] A&R (Artist and Repertoire), the division of a record label that scouts for new artists and oversees an artist's development, began to be outsourced to independent ("indie") labels. What resulted was a trend that would later come to define the 1980s recording industry and the recording industry of today: the emergence of pop superstars such as Michael Jackson, Madonna, Prince, Janet Jackson, Lionel Ritchie, Bruce Springsteen, and George Michael.

For an industry seeking to promote such big-name talents, 1980 appeared to be the right time for a network like MTV to come to fruition. Pittman suggested this in a Los Angeles Times interview: "Stations are becoming more conservative in their programming and people are beginning to look for something fresh," Pittman stated. "We'll play the hit artists, but we'll also play the new music."[28] But the record label, much like their cable counterparts were not instantly enthusiastic about the prospect of increasing the production of "music clips." Even before MTV was given the green light, the record industry was grappling with how to manage this new content form. In November 1979, *Billboard* magazine held the first Video Music Conference in a Los Angeles Sheraton-Universal Hotel. At the conference, artists like Todd Rundgren and Michael Nesmith screened their own videos, and record labels showed off clips by David

Bowie, Meat Loaf, Rod Stewart, and Blondie, whose album *Eat to the Beat* came with a videodisk with videos for every song. John Lack participated in a panel entitled "Video Music – Tomorrow Is Here Today," and expressed his intention to start a twenty-four hour video music network for broadcast cable. At the end of Lack's presentation, which he described as "pretty classy and elegant,"[29] Sidney Sheinberg – who was then the president of MCA – stood up and proclaimed, "We ain't giving you our fucking music."[30] These early tensions foreshadowed the hesitance Lack and his team would receive at the fabled board meeting in a few months later.

Such dramatic backlash stems from the perception that MTV would be getting its music videos, thus its primary content, for free. Stan Cornyn, then executive vice president of Warner Brothers Records, remembers a visit from Pittman:

> Pittman showed up in my office and said, "Will you make these for us?" Meaning, would we spend our money to do their programming. Trying to be a good corporate scout, I said, "We are going to get into this"—which meant nothing, of course. We did do a little bit, but the people at MTV had a huge sales job. When it comes to interest in new technology, the record business finishes just ahead of the Amish.[31]

However, the often-cited idea that the content was free is only partially correct. Scholar R. Serge Denisoff explains the fees in his detailed account of MTV's corporate structure, *Inside MTV*. "Each clip cost MTV approximately $1,000 to clean up the audio and transfer the material to one-inch tape," Denisoff specifies. "In addition, there was a 14 cent licensing [mechanical] royalty to be paid to ASCAP or BMI."[32] Thus, MTV's uses of video clips were not completely free, but the costs still were nothing compared to production fees. However, Pittman felt that the MTV platform would be perfect to spur the increasingly perceived slow-down of the music industry. Television meant exposure – *visual* exposure – for artists to a potentially national audience.

Pittman believed that artists could breakout through MTV as they did on radio in decades past. The blueprints for the station's strategy were laid out in a lengthy 1981 *Billboard* interview, where Pittman proclaimed the network would be "as important as radio, but more importantly, we are targeting the record buyer."[33] MTV was to be broadcast in a stereo-sound transmission. Viewers would be able to hear and see their artists in the highest quality format available at the time, 24 hours a day. In addition to these video clips, the network would broadcast a variety of special programs, including concert films, narrative films, and also air interviews with the industry's most popular stars conducted by a consistent group of attractive and engaging video jockeys, or VJs. The flow would enable a synergy of promotion for an industry that was seeking new approaches in marketing. In other words, MTV's producers felt that the channel would be able to create never-before-seen efforts in music promotion that would generate buzz for artists, encourage continued viewing, and continued buying. The record labels only had to buy into this idea and television as a platform for promotion through music videos, a platform that only returned mediocre profits in the past.

The MTV team's enthusiasm for their strategies ultimately paid off, and was a driving force behind getting record label's to participate. Then RCA president Bob Summer remembered John Lack's pitch:

> Lack took me to dinner at the Four Season and tried to explain why this was going to be so good for us. When you have a good business, and someone proposes to change your fundamental marketing tactic, you have to think more than twice. But you had the sense that these guys were definitely going to go for it.[34]

RCA agreed to the conditions and began to produce music videos for the channel. Budgets around $15,000 to $25,000 were common for each video.[35] "Everyone played a little at first," stated Summer. "But no one really dove in."[36] Perry Cooper, an Atlantic Records executive, was also hesitant despite increasing the productions of video clips, but

only because they guaranteed exposure. “We’re in the business of getting artists exposed. It wouldn’t help to charge for the clips,” stated Perry Cooper. [37] With the help of his reluctant record industry partners, Pittman estimated that MTV would have a 400-clip library by the first broadcast.[38] However, Pittman still made concessions, such as superimposing the name of the artist, song, album, and label at the beginning and end of each video to be aired in order for easier audience recognition. Regardless, Pittman and his team were grateful for any cooperation from the labels. They only needed the advertising industry to do the same.

Selling MTV to Madison Avenue met the same reluctant responses as the cable and record industries. For advertisers, cable television was a brand new venture. The success of a cable channel’s ability to promote products was an untested notion. Arnie Semsky, media director at the advertising agency Baiten, Barton, Durstine, & Osborne, Inc., told the *Wall Street Journal* “the execution will determine how well it is received.”[39] Larry Blasius of the same agency recalled that MTV had a “conceptual sales problem with clients who still have a problem with rock and roll, similar to the way they felt about rock radio when it first emerged. They’d rather not get involved.”[40] The American advertising industry, as it was in 1980 and still is now, was beginning to be obsessed with market segmentation, but the traditions of a youth-oriented rock and roll culture still discouraged the established and influential moguls on Madison Avenue to take part in this risky venture. In essence, the hesitance towards MTV as a viable platform for promotion became a capitalistic catch-22. In order for MTV to obtain support from the advertising industry, they needed convey that they had a proven and consistent means in which to reach a wide audience. But in order to have that reach, MTV needed the support of advertisers to provide revenue for such consistency and growth. Thus, cable

broadcasters needed to sell a concept and hope that viewers would buy into it. Pittman and his team were convinced that young music listeners would turn into music watchers.

Cooperation from the advertising community was essential, as the channel relied on advertisers for revenue. The first big pitch to the community was made at the cable broadcast convention in New York City in the spring of 1981, where various new channels would pitch to major advertising agencies in order to garner support. Pittman contacted Fred Seibert, a Grammy-nominated jazz producer who worked for The Movie Channel after his own radio career. For his pitch, he decided to produce a three-minute filmed presentation to sell the network. "I didn't have a clue how to make a three-minute tape,"[41] remembered Alan Goodman, a fellow MTV producer who had been an ad copywriter at CBS records. Seibert built the three-minute presentation out of slides and a number of music clips. He also added an announcer's track that was recorded in stereo sound to preview the channel's stereo-sound broadcast. For a convention that featured dozens of dull presentations, MTV's pitch stood out both visually and sonically with the help of a large screen and a set of high-quality speakers. "There were people, honest to God, dancing," remembers MTV's head of sales and marketing, Bob McGroarty. "I thought, Holy Christ! This is bigger than I ever imagined."[42]

In 1981, the thirty-second advertising rate for a cable broadcast was $1,200. MTV's spots were actually selling for $350 and $650, and only 30% of the station's commercial time had been sold to a meager thirteen sponsors. "We finally persuaded thirteen hardy souls to come with us. We offered to do their commercials for them, which pissed off the ad agencies," Bob McGroarty stated in 1988.[43] The most active buyers came from the Hollywood film studios, which knew of the importance of the youth demographic. Avco-Embassy, Filmways, United Artists, Universal Pictures, Dolby

Laboratories, Pepsico, 7-Up, and the United States Navy agreed to be original time buyers.

MTV's association with big-brands brought about a new look towards television advertising, where the provocative and stylistic nature music videos became a staple of mid to late eighties promotional material. MTV became strict about the direct connections between the two. In later years, Propaganda filmmakers would encounter these limitations due to commercial obligations:

> Well the first problem was that there was a Coke machine in some of the stock footage that we used. So they refused to play it because it had a Coke machine. They could see the Coke logo. So we painted out the Coke logo. At the time it was very expensive. Then they saw something else they didn't like, so we took that out.

Then as now, MTV holds a partnership with PepsiCola for cross-promotional advertising.[44] Pop superstars like Madonna, Lionel Ritchie, and Michael Jackson all had endorsement deals with Pepsi and starred in high-budget commercials featuring their latest hits. The pop-centric ads worked well in MTV's own pop-centric broadcasted flow. This corporate presence is indicative of what Raymond Williams cited as a "counter-revolution" in which conglomerate ventures have a certain reach into our lives, where choice only becomes limited between "programmed possibilities."[45] The relation between music video and television advertisement, a similarity scholar E. Ann Kaplan noted in 1987[46], becomes almost invisible in the cross-promotional marketplace of soft drink and pop star. I highlight this case only as an example of how MTV proved beneficial for national brands as well as the recording artist. This convergent make-up would prove useful for Propaganda's filmmakers later, as they became drawn to the lucrative advertising business, an industry Propaganda increasingly became involved with in the

1990s. Propaganda upheld its conceptual namesake eagerly and consistently because of these corporate relations.

Financial backers from the cable industry, the record industry, and Madison Avenue were as uncertain about MTV's success as MTV's own producers. Only the history of radio broadcasting really gave any indication for such a format's success; if it could work audibly for radio, why could it not work *visually* for television? Also, market segmentation would benefit the station. As detailed by Pittman, Lack, and their colleagues, demographics were key for MTV, as they believed that the station would attract the 12 to 35-year-olds that both networks and cable operators were eager to attract. This emphasis on demographics indicates a broad theme in promoting and distributing popular music throughout the 20th and into the 21st century: the continual reluctance of established media organizations to appease and adhere to the tastes and cultures of American youth and the failure to see that population, at least in hindsight, as a viable source for consistent consumption. For Pittman and his team at MTV, their task was to remind media industries of this viable audience. MTV then becomes not only a site for the convergence of three formally self-contained industries, but also a site for the cultural and industrial development of media viewing practices. Despite the excitement of seeing a year-plus worth of coercing and selling become a reality, Pittman and his team continued to reshape their venture and slowly transform MTV into something more than a commercially successful venture but a cultural milestone in itself.

**MTV COMING ONTO ITS OWN**

Midnight on August 1 1981 brought simultaneious excitement and relief for the MTV producers and production crew. Months of preparation, industry wrangling, and content gathering was finally going to pay off with MTV's premiere, for better or worse.

The broadcast began with the now-iconic astronaut launching off into space and planting his multi-colored MTV flag on the moon's surface. Then the image dissolved to John Lack himself, who began by welcoming viewers to the new form of television:

> This is it. Welcome to MTV music television. The world's first 24 hour stereo-video music channel. Just moments ago, all of the VJs and crew here at MTV collectively hit our executive producer Sue Steinberg over the head with a bottle of champagne and behold…a new concept was born. The best of TV combined with the best of radio. And starting right now, you'll never look at music the same way again.[47]

The copywriters for the first broadcast foregrounded MTV's convergent nature: a television station that acts like a radio, a new form of visual music entertainment. The VJ's would introduce videos new and old, bridging the gap between songs and introducing video segments. This is similar duty to the radio DJ: to guide viewers/listeners through the current trends in pop music. Much like a museum tour guide, VJs would lead consumers through MTV's music video collection and highlight and tout pieces that were new and noteworthy. The first video aired was The Bungle's "Video Killed the Radio Star." The reason for the song's choice was obvious to MTV's producers and their audience.

Remarkably, that initial audience was not in New York City where the channel was being filmed and broadcasted. At the time of MTV's debut, no Manhattan cable operator agreed to carry the channel. In fact, MTV's first few months on the air failed to reach a large market outside of Columbus, Ohio, home of the QUBE system. At the time, most cable broadcasts were in the suburbs or rural areas. MTV employees not involved with the actual broadcast bused across the George Washington Bridge over to Fort Lee, New Jersey, the nearest location where the signal was available. There, the group rented out the basement of a small bar and set up half-a-dozen TVs in order to watch. There were no advertisers present and only one cable operator showed up – the local from New

Jersey who was also the first who agreed to carry the station. The broadcast itself was also a disaster. VJ segments aired out of order and the broadcast stream was awkwardly edited. "The VJs would announce, 'That was Styx,' right after we'd played REO Speedwagon. They'd say 'This is The Who,' and a .38 Special video would begin," remembers Pittman of that celebratory but stressful first broadcast. "Everything that could have gone wrong did go wrong. It was probably one of the worst nights in my life. While everyone was celebrating, I was on a telephone with the network operations center, going ballistic."[48]

Reviews of the first broadcast were cautiously optimistic, but cited the limited reach of MTV's broadcast. In the *Los Angeles Times*, Bob Hilburn wrote, "MTV's campaign won't be known for weeks, maybe months."[49] *Cablevision*, a major CATV trade publication, was generally enthusiastic about the concept when reviewer Robert DiMatteo stated, "the channel is a bold example of the cable industry's move toward specialized audience programming."[50] *Advertising Age,* in light of the network's shortcoming in ad sales, displayed caution, leading with the headline: "MTV Sells 30%." The article itself had cautious applause like other trade publications, since MTV had yet to prove itself to the industry. Outside of the *L.A. Times* and trade publications like *Advertising Age*, the network received little coverage. *The New York Times* failed to report anything about the advent of the station and its initial launch. With the *Times* absence and no broadcast for New York City, MTV had little pull in the area. MTV executive Jack Schneider took notice: "We were stunned, hurt, and angry…I wanted to shake them and say 'Pay attention, we're doing something here that's significant.' But their reaction was 'yawn.'"[51]

The next year saw MTV's unique platform for music video content slowly begin to pay off. The record industry began utilizing MTV as a viable resource that influenced

record sales. In MTV's first couple of years, the majority of music video content came from Australia and Europe, as labels were more willing to utilize smaller budget foreign artist. "We had been asking the record companies to produce videos with no guarantee of success, so we'd been left with groups like Adam Ant that no one else had," recalls McGroarty. "But all of a sudden people were coming into record stores and saying, 'I want Adam Ant's new album.'"[52] Records began selling in cities without having had any airplay, and this random spike of sales was quickly attributed to that artist's presence on MTV. "The pressure from artists and managers was awful," recalled Lenny Waronker, then president of Warner Bros. Records. "Everybody wanted to do a video. You had to get on. The kids would hang around late at night to watch." By the end of 1982, large labels like Warner Bros. Records, Arista, and RCA began to admit that MTV did in fact have an effect on sales. Perhaps the ultimate validation was the September 1982 issue of *Billboard*. The magazine conducted a survey of retailers from cities around the nation. The headline read: "Survey Finds MTV Strongly Affecting Record Sales." Some retailers claimed they had to request records they never heard of before. "It seems to spur sales of obscure groups, and it helps because radio stations won't play new artists," one retailer claimed. [53] MTV and cable systems in general improved on targeting, as advertisers could preselect demographic characteristics. Advertising budgets could be spent accordingly and effectively in order to reach a particular market, such as the 14 to 24 year-old demographic.[54] MTV thus became a surefire means of reaching a young audience.

With growing attention from the record labels, cable and advertising followed suit. MTV began tweaking the channel in response. Producers rebuilt the original MTV studio set and altered some formal elements, such as dimming the lighting and quicker editing between segments. Also, the network started producing promotional spots using rock and roll's elite to promote MTV's expansion into new markets outside of the

Midwest such as New York City, which still did not carry the channel still one year after it was first broadcasted. “America, demand your MTV! Call your cable operator now. Call him and say ‘I want my MTV!’” proclaims a wide-eyed Pete Townshend, lead guitarist for The Who, in one spot. The various artists were called in on a volunteer basis and included, Adam Ant, John Cougar Mellancamp, Pat Benatar, Stevie Nicks, Hall and Oates, David Bowie, Peter Wolf, Sting, Rick Ocasek, and others. Denise Bozi, the promotion manager at Manhattan cable called the promotion “brilliant” as it illustrated MTV as a viable means to bring in the biggest artists and showcase new talent.[55] In May 1983, Pittman also appeared before the prestigious National Academy for Television Arts, and Sciences heralding MTV’s success: “There will be about 20 million pay subscribers by the end of the year, and we project that by 1985 there will be 45 million pay subscribers…benefits will be dramatic.”[56] Between the in your face advertising campaign and Pittman’s continual attempt at getting cable operators to finally admit to MTV’s viability, the promotions paid off. Beginning in September 1982, Manhattan Cable began broadcasting MTV. The network now had 6.75 million hookups throughout the nation.

Cultural critics, however, began to cry foul about MTV’s music video selection. “MTV was racist,” recording artist Joe Jackson once claimed.[57] Such a blunt statement was somewhat validated in light of MTV’s video selections. In the first two years of broadcasting, MTV rarely played music videos by black artists. Bob Pittman and Les Garland defended their policy by saying that black artists were not excluded because of race but due to their musical stylings. For Pittman, if it was not rock and roll or new wave oriented it was not suitable for the network. MTV executive were quick to come to the channel’s defense“The worst thing was that ‘racism’ bullshit,” stated Les Garland. “There were artist of color on MTV: Joan Armatrading, Eddy Grant, the Busy Boys, even

Prince. But there were hardly any videos being made by black artists. Record companies weren't funding them. *They* never got accused of racism."[58] Bob Pittman's desire for a rock and roll format met with disapproval from inside MTV as well. Carolyn Baker, an MTV executive, remembers telling Pittman "We've got to play James Brown." Pittman cited network research, which said "our audience thinks rock and roll started with the Beatles." The belief was that white suburbanites, who were the vast majority of those who watched cable, would not be receptive to pop, R&B, or funk genres.

Pittman would be proven wrong in 1983. Pop superstar Michael Jackson had released his album *Thriller* in late-November 1982. It was a gigantic success for the artist and his label Epic Records, selling $1 million in sales per week at its peak.[59] Michael Jackson was the quintessential artist in the recording industry's superstar blockbuster strategy that emerged after the late 70s recording industry slump. Labels released fewer albums but with greater budgets, creating a blockbuster mentally for their biggest artists. "Astronomically high, non-refundable advances, huge marketing budgets, including expensive music video productions, vast tour expenses etc. had driven production and marketing budgets to unprecedented heights," wrote music business researcher Peter Tschmuck.[60]

Jackson had had some success with music videos for the singles "Beat It" and "Billie Jean," but the album sales began to decline in the summer of 1983. Jackson wanted to make a "short film" to accompany the title-track single and perhaps boost sales again. "We're trying to bring back the motion picture shorts," Jackson said. "And I wanted "Thriller" and "Beat It" to be a stimulant for people to make better videos or short films." Jackson's influence for his short film came from Hollywood horror films. Jackson spoke about watching one film from 1981:

> I watched *American Werewolf in London*. We really really liked it, because it was a different type of horror movie, it was comedy *and* horror. Well, that's the way I see it. And I said, 'Who's the director that did it?' and they said it was John Landis. I said, "Great, we need to get in touch with him."[61]

Landis was intrigued by the proposition:

> "I didn't know the song, but I knew the album, and I knew 'Beat It' and 'Billie Jean.' Bob Giraldi directed "Beat It" and "Beat It" is genuinely good. But the idea of making short little songs doesn't interest me at all. So, I said to Michael, "Listen Michael, I'd love to make something more elaborate," which Michael picked up on because that's what he wanted to do. His whole thing was it's gotta be good, it's gotta be great, it's gotta be big. The best.[62]

With a half-a-million dollar budget from Epic (and Jackson's own personal investments)[63], Jackson and Landis decided to work together and try to create the most elaborate music video yet. Hiring industry make-up legend Rick Baker to design Jackson's werewolf and zombie outfits, the scale of the production seemed akin to a Hollywood feature film. Due to massive lead-up promotion by both Epic Records and MTV, there was a large audience eagerly awaiting its premiere on the cable network on December 2, 1982.

For the video, Les Garland stated that the network settled on a saturation strategy he described as "'Every time we play "Thriller," let's tell them when we are going to play it again,' We played it three to five times a day. We were getting audience ratings 10 times the usual when we broadcast 'Thriller.'"[64] The video also influenced an increased black artist presence on the channel, diversifying its content and setting up a precedent for future programs like *Yo! MTV Raps* to premiere at the end of the decade. The industrial implications of the "Thriller" video's success were quickly apparent. "The big turning point was 'Thriller.'"claimed music video director Briant Grant. "As soon as the American [film industry] got involved, things became monetized turning music videos

into a proper industry, which operated alongside MTV."[65] Both budgets and expectations grew for the music videos after "Thriller," and the industry has not looked back since.

## CONCLUSION

By 1984, MTV's prevalence in the American media-scape was solidified. Both *Rolling Stone* and *Time* had cover stories about the channel and the rising success of music videos. The year is also when MTV aired its first *Music Video Awards* featuring Madonna and her infamous pointed brassiere. Though the criticisms still continue in regards to the network's handling of its content and its dabbling with "low-culture" tropes, the discourse surrounding music videos and their various platforms have fully come onto their own. The "Thriller" music video proved that the station had dramatic power over record sales, especially if music video budgets continued to grow. Perhaps the new and growing relation between music videos and Hollywood was a natural one, as production systems were firmly in place and directors could experiment and showcase their capabilities in this new medium. Also, MTV provided a dependable means in which to get these filmmakers' works seen consistently. The youth market was growing accustomed to MTV's presence, and often first looks at new pop artists were on the channel. Even if they did not realize it at the time, MTV's audience was also seeing the emergence of a growing number of music video filmmakers. Propaganda would become the center of this new community

Hopeful filmmakers, particularly the soon-to-be Propaganda founders like David Fincher, Dominic Sena, and Nigel Dick, had a new means of which to enter the industry and make a name for themselves. A young and eager group of men - Hollywood hopefuls themselves – felt that their collective determination could lead towards success in the field. MTV became a necessary and pivotal component for this field to flourish. Without

such a platform, Propaganda would not have been so eager to take the risk in starting the venture. Extending these trends into television advertising would prove a beneficial approach towards making a name for themselves as filmmakers of high-concept stylistic promotional material. Their own particular form of music video aesthetics, which I detail in chapter three, would fit perfectly on the station that already made a name for itself kinetically showcasing a visual style of music on television.

By 1985, with three years of proven success, cultural relevance, and a growing audience, the stage was set for Propaganda's establishment. The initially skeptical beginnings of a "video-radio" station had grown into a new form of television. Propaganda's founders understood how it was an opportune time to own-up towards their commercial and aesthetic aspirations to create a space for innovation and financial succes. It only took a little collaboration and a lot of conceptualizing to make those aspirations a reality. They only had to put themselves out there.

*Chapter 1 Endnotes*

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[23] Ibid., ebook

[24] Quoted in Robert Sam Anson, "Birth of an MTV Nation," Vanity Fair, November, 2000, http://www.vanityfair.com/news/2000/11/mtv200011 (February 7 2015)

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[26] Peter Tschmuck. "The Recession – A Cause Analysis," Music Business Research, accessed February 7, 2015, https://musicbusinessresearch.wordpress.com/2010/03/29/the-recession-in-the-music-industry-a-cause-analysis/

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[32] Quoted in R. Serge Denisoff, *Inside MTV* (New Brunswick: Transaction Publishers, 1988), 39.

[33] Quoted in Jim McCullaugh, "Cable Channel Seen Helping Record Sales," Billboard, March 14, 1981, http://www.billboard.com/magazine-archive (February 9 2015)

[34] Quoted in Robert Sam Anson, *Birth of an MTV Nation*, Vanity Fair, November, 2000, http://www.vanityfair.com/news/2000/11/mtv200011 (February 9 2015)

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[37] Quoted in R. Serge Denisoff, *Inside MTV* (New Brunswick: Transaction Publishers, 1988), 41.

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[59] Of course Thriller would later be one of the highest selling albums of all time, reaching 29x Platinum.

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## Chapter 2:

## Selling Propaganda: *Propaganda Films, 1986 - 1991*

By the middle of the 1980s, music videos, with the help of MTV's growing popularity, became an established and familiar form of filmed entertainment. Their cultural appeal was also met with financial success. The era's biggest stars became even bigger because of their music videos. MTV began to lose its claim as the sole source for music video content on television, as competition grew and other video channels were established. On March 5, 1983, Glenn D. Daniels launched Country Music Television from his production facility, Video World Productions, in Henderson, Tennessee. The channel catered to a large country music fan base that was eager for a visual accompaniment for their beloved music. More forms of music were now getting their visual due through these new broadcast niche platforms. In August 1984, Canadian media company CHUM launched the MuchMusic channel, which played music-related programs throughout the day, with other forms of programming – game shows, sitcoms, and infomercials – at night. On New Years Day, 1985, MTV itself launched another network, Video Hits One, or VH1, in order to showcase the softer and lighter side of mainstream popular music, a refuge for the older music video viewer consumer to limit the loud, sex-driven, and raucous programming of MTV and its rock and roll vibe. Rather than new wave, pop, and rock stars, VH1 played music by Tina Turner, Kenny Rogers, Carly Simon, Elton John, and Billy Joel - an older breed of rock star for an older demographic.[1]

On September 4, 1984, MTV aired its first Video Music Awards, which honored the best music videos from that previous year. The ceremony was held at New York City's famous Radio City Music Hall with Dan Akroyd and Bette Midler hosting. During

the ceremony, Madonna performed "Like a Virgin" wearing her fabled pointed brassiere and wedding gown, ushering yet another new form of music on television: the award show performance, which has still remained another way for pop stars to market their newest singles and remind audiences of their provocative appeal through live performance. The Cars' video for their song "You Might Think" won the first ever Video of the Year award, and Herbie Hancock took the most trophies home with five for the video for his crossover hit "Rockit."[2] At another ceremony that year, the Grammys, the award for Best Music Video, Short Form, which was given for the first time, went to Duran Duran for "Girls on Film/Hungry Like the Wolf." Award shows like the VMAs and the Grammys provided yet another way for popular music to reach audiences through television broadcasts in order to promote artists and their records. In other words, these shows were advertisements in themselves, a method of giving critical and cultural validity to music videos through awards and recognition.[3]

As discussed in the previous chapter, music videos and their distribution platforms, particularly those of the 1980s, stand as a result of media industries undergoing convergent transformations. These transformations went beyond the music video production business and indicated new trends of American media-making as market segmentation diversified broadcast content. By 1986, music videos became "a form of video (and cultural) production whose surface of sights and sounds, imagery and music, has transformed and reorganized the limits of television and music, film and video, advertising, and fashion."[4] This new diversification was apparent to a group of filmmakers - Steve Golin, Jani Sighvatsson, Monty Montgomery, Nigel Dick, Dominic Sena, and David Fincher - who in 1986, founded Propaganda Films, a production company that would utilize music videos and television commercials to promote their filmmaking talent and sell the services of Propaganda Films, its employees, and their

various clients. Some of the biggest stars in the music industry utilized Propaganda for their music videos, including Madonna, Paula Abdul, Janet Jackson, Guns N' Roses, Steve Winwood, and Billy Idol.

So why detail Propaganda Films' formative years as a case study? The first reason for my focus is straightforward: Propaganda's narrative and role in American entertainment industries is remarkably absent from scholarly discourse. Its absence has proved a challenge for my own research, as sources are significantly lacking. Budgets, finances, organizational structures, and employee list are currently lost, and the only members with access to such information have been unwilling to participate in my study. I am aware of these shortcomings, and understand my study's limited perspective without them. Nonetheless, my hope is to at least chronicle this narrative and provide incentive for myself (and hopefully others) to continue in engaging this organization's history. Included in my study are interviews with a few Propaganda employees I have conducted. These interviews help illustrate how such a company was managed, how it operated, and what social dynamics were in play.

Scholarly discussions about music videos focus on two particular aspects of music video history: 1) attempting to define and delineate music videos as a unique art form and/or 2) the significance of MTV as a paradigm-shifting media platform. While I do find these discussions highly warranted, my personal aim is to go beyond such discourse and approach the medium with new lines of inquiry. Who made music videos? Why? How were they made? Were their productions different than other forms of filmed entertainment? What approach and perspectives did these filmmakers have on this form of content? I believe Propaganda Films is an excellent place to begin answering such questions, and I hope to provide some insight in light of this absence.

The second reason is that Propaganda was the most successful music video and commercial production company of the late eighties and spurred further success for its filmmakers in Hollywood. After David Lynch won the Palme d'Or for *Wild at Heart* (1990), a project that Steve Golin and Propaganda shepherded and financed, the production company began shifting its focus on feature films, which included producing more works by David Lynch and other films by Jane Campion and Spike Jonze. Dominic Sena would go on to direct mainstream studio films such as *Gone in 60 Seconds* (2000) and *Swordfish* (2001). Nigel Dick would continue to direct videos for the next 20 years after his departure from the company in 1994, including Britney Spear's video for "Hit Me Baby One More Time" and Cher's "Believe." David Fincher's success has been the most notable, with a number of critical and commercial hits including *Seven* (1995), *Fight Club* (1999), *The Curious Case of Benjamin Button* (2008), and *The Girl With the Dragon Tattoo* (2011). Propaganda Films thus acted as an incubator for some of Hollywood's best talent. My study accounts for how such a platform could lead to this notoriety and provide a glimpse of their early careers, a history that has been curiously neglected in the academy and in the trade press.

Third, I argue that Propaganda Films echoed MTV's narrative as a site of media convergence. Propaganda's formation was a result of the continued need for new content in a variety of forms. MTV had not only provided a marketable platform for recording artists, but the visuals, sounds, and the kinetic pacing of its music videos had begun to influence other forms of content as well. Hollywood's major film studios built lucrative connections between filmed entertainment and pop music. Films like *Flashdance* (1983) and *Top Gun* (1986) showcased music-video like segments and even had their own cross promotions with recording artists utilizing music videos that contained clips from the films.[5] The connection was natural as "it didn't take a fortuneteller to see the obvious

connections [between film and popular music], considering that the youth audience had been a vital demographic for Hollywood film for decades."[6] As head of Columbia Music Richard Gold claimed, "The Target audience for MTV is the same target for pictures. You need the 12 to 25 demographic."[7]

Scholar Sarah Benet-Weiser's discussion of branding's relation to audience applies to music videos discourse. The niche marketing that platforms like MTV provided was "in part about recognizing communities, but at the same time, niche marketing reified identities into market categories."[8] "Counterculture," which was often showcased in Propaganda's corporate strategy and produced content as means to differentiate themselves from the perceived status-quo, also served as a way to reach niche markets. Gary Cross points out that counter-culturalists became rebels through consumption and that the "counter" in culture was very much within the confines of consumerism. For Cross, "counterculture was a movement deeply entrenched in materialist society and was "intensely entrepreneurial."[9] Propaganda's company name implies the company's awareness of these "materialistic" ventures in the counter-culture of music video production. By differentiating themselves from other Hollywood production companies, Propaganda utilized this counter-culture consumerism as a means to de-marginalize their position in the film industry in order to eventually join it. Much like howHollywood incorporated music video elements into its own productions to jive with the period's trends, Propaganda fully welcomed alternative stylings into their production repertoire. Propaganda's atypical make-up as a purely music video and television advertisement company was beneficial, as their acceptance and celebration of niche industrial markets enabled them to anticipate American media's continued diversification in the next decade. Propaganda stands as an early purveyor of the multi-

platform production company that saw cinema as only one method of promoting their talented employees and innovative work.

Such trends inevitably altered Hollywood's own marketing techniques, as big-budget Hollywood blockbusters continuously used the stylizations and rhythms of music videos in their own narratives (see Chapter 3 for a detailed discussion of music video style). This dynamic relationship was beneficial for both industries, as music videos were often used for a film's promotion. As Barbara Klinger comments, the "promotional apparatus of a film tends to multiply the meanings from the text in order to increase an audience base."[10] Justin Wyatt speaks of music videos as "raiding the text" and expanding the film beyond itself and into other content forms.[11] However, my aims are not to place music videos, commercials, and Propaganda Films itself under the umbrella of Hollywood and feature-filmmaking promotion. Rather, I hope to blur the lines between these different arenas and continue to detail how different content forms had a hand in shaping Propaganda's productions and the company itself. For Propaganda, music videos and television advertisements were a particular type of art form that held their own aesthetic qualities. Granted, these qualities would be used for promotional purposes as well, for both the artist and the company. Again, in an age where synergies reigned supreme for successful and diverse examples of filmed entertainment, Propaganda serves as an excellent way to engage the notable trends of this period in American popular culture and its various industries.

The present chapter details Propaganda Films' story as a means to engage music video and commercial productions and their place within a broader American entertainment industry. Particularly, I'll be focusing on Propaganda's first five years as a company, from its founding in 1986 to 1991. There are a couple of reasons for this bracketing. In 1991, Polygram acquired Propaganda and folded it into their studio,

Polygram Filmed Entertainment, ending an era of independence. Propaganda did ultimately benefit from the deal, which gave them access to around $40 million and enabled them to compete more directly with Hollywood studios.[12] Prior to the acquisition, Propaganda's key filmmakers – Steve Golin, Jani Sighvatsson, Dominic Sena, Monty Montgomery, Nigel Dick, Greg Gold, and David Fincher – attempted to develop a creative arena in which the group's talent and professional capabilities could be showcased to the industry through the completion of a large number of projects, principally music videos and television advertisements. I argue that this period of independence is what makes Propaganda's position in the American film industry notable, as the filmmakers were able to corral their own tastes and products within the company's framework and utilize those attributes in order to support the company and its "brand." From a scholarly perspective, the second reason is more practical. In the first five years of Propaganda's existence, the studio was amazingly prolific, producing and distributing hundreds of music videos and commercials. Some estimates in the trade press, though ultimately unverified, claimed that Propaganda was responsible for a third of all music videos being made.[13] I argue this period is the most indicative of Propaganda's early corporate strategies and correlates well with the scope of my thesis. Hopefully future endeavors could continue Propaganda's historical narrative past this period and until its end in 2000, completing its story.

The following analysis consists of three sections. The first details the careers of Propaganda filmmakers prior to Propaganda's formation in the fall of 1986. These individual's earlier history speaks towards the ways filmmakers engaged with both music video and commercial work and how their professional drive led to more opportunities within the recording and advertising industries. The combination of factors preceded the company's founding – such as early experiences in music video and television

advertisement filmmaking, dissatisfaction with their production houses, and their own professional aspiration to take part in more substantial high-budget productions. These factors would encourage the decision to begin a new company that could cater to their eclectic practices and strong independent streaks.

The subsequent section charts the first three years of Propaganda's existence, when industry connections allowed them to consistently be commissioned to produce or direct music videos and commercials. This enabled Propaganda to generate striking and consistently viable work. I also discuss the relation between the six founding Propaganda filmmakers – Steve Golin, Jani Sighvatsson, Nigel Dick, Dominic Sena, Greg Gold and David Fincher – working with each other and within the company as a whole. While the word "collective" has been thrown around multiple times in a variety of interviews with members of the group, I hope to clarify how much or how little Propaganda's production practices corresponded with this touted collaboration. Often these outspoken ideals differ from actual practice.

The third section looks at the production processes for music videos and commercials. This includes a detailed account of the production of Nigel Dick's "Welcome to the Jungle" video in the fall of 1987, which would become the MTV's most requested video. Guns N' Roses, who had become popular with singles "Welcome to the Jungle" and "Sweet Child of Mine" from their album *Appetite for Destruction*, were just one of many top pop artists utilizing Propaganda's talents. As I establish, the connections between Propaganda and their musical artists were interpersonal and casual in nature. The production of the "Welcome to the Jungle" was deeply rooted in practicality and efficiency, where a quick turnaround was essential for both Nigel Dick the director and Guns N' Roses the band. MTV's censorship is also an indication that Propaganda's content was still at the mercy of established industries. I end this section with a brief

discussion of the differences between music video and commercial production, where the shorter form of television advertisements were often marred by the lengthy process of exhaustive branding and the more corporate clientele. Commercials also provided financial incentives. The advertising industry was eager and willing to work with Propaganda's directors. Productions differed from music videos in that they often were longer to complete and included the input of advertising creatives and their brand clients. More importantly for Propaganda's filmmakers, they were often more lucrative ventures than music videos. Commercials provided another type of content through which the company's filmmakers could showcase their talent.

I conclude this chapter with Propaganda's sale to Polygram Filmed Entertainment and the success of David Lynch's *Wild at Heart*, which enabled Steve Golin to produce high-quality independent feature films. This transition period for the company would mark the beginning of the end of Propaganda's independence from other media-producers. This acquisition was a source of conflict between the filmmakers, as the proclaimed haven for directors – a site for filmmakers to work on the projects they wanted in the way they wanted – was also framed by a growing corporate interest.

## PRE-PROPAGANDA AND FOUNDING A MUSIC VIDEO/COMMERCIAL POWERHOUSE

In the fall of 1985, director Nigel Dick, who at the time lived in the United Kingdom, was on location in Los Angeles shooting Tears for Fears' "Everybody Wants to Rule the World" music video, one of three videos he would direct for their album *Songs From the Big Chair*. While staying in Los Angeles, Dick met Steve Golin, who was producing music videos for Mark Friedman Productions. Golin approached Dick about an opportunity to work in the United States. "Steve said, 'If you come to LA, I can get you work,'" remembers Dick about the meeting. [14] Dick was enticed by the offer,

even if it meant relocating his work to a different continent. Prior to Golin's offer, Dick had already made a name for himself in the UK as a music video director for Stiff Records. As mentioned earlier, labels in Europe exported their videos to the US as a relatively cheap means of international promotion, at least compared to the costs of touring. At Stiff Records, Nigel Dick directed his first music video in 1983 for John Lewie's song "I'll Think I'll Get My Haircut." This was the start of his career at Stiff Records and later Phonogram Records, which had merged with Polydoor records in 1972 to create PolyGram. At PolyGram, Dick worked on a number of videos including "Do They Know It's Christmas?" by the supergroup Band Aid, "Things Can Only Get Better" by Howard Jones, and the songs from Tears For Fears from *Songs From the Big Chair*. "The production on ["Everybody Wants to Rule the World"] was in fact so cataclysmically bad that I figured that Steve and [the rest of Propaganda's founders] could only improve on what had been an awful experience and that, if I ever returned to LA, I would want to work with him."[15]

Steve Golin, who came to Los Angeles in 1981 to attend the producer's program at the American Film Institute, had been working at Mark Friedman productions producing music videos and straight-to-video content, capitalizing on the home video boom of the time. He and a fellow classmate at AFI, an Icelander named Jani Sighvatsson, had became line producers for low-budget films. "That was an interesting period of time because it was the early stages of the home-video business," said Golin in 2013. "We'd make movies for three or four hundred thousand dollars a movie and the movies would be distributed to home video and exploited that way."[16] Though producing partners, Golin and Sighvatsson worked at different companies, Mark Friedman Productions and N. Lee Lacy respectively. With Sighvatsson at N. Lee Lacy, a commercial production company, were directors Dominic Sena and Greg Gold. Also,

Steve invited his good friend and fellow producer Monty Montgomery to be a part of the group. Nigel Dick had worked with Golin, Gold, and Sena in the past when he had commissioned them to work music video productions during his tenure at Phonograph. All of the men were not satisfied with their current positions, and wanted to start their own venture. Dick remembers the anxiousness of the group:

> By the time I spent 9 months or so working at Mark Friedman productions, I realized that I wasn't very happy about how the company was running. I was having immigration problems, so I needed to work for a company that had more going for it. Dom and Greg were over at N. Lee Lacy with Jani. They wanted to have a company of their own for their own reasons. They weren't happy with N. Lee Lacy. There was this young kid there who wanted to leave [also], which was David Fincher. Well, it didn't take long for us to all go, "Well, let's form our own company."[17]

Like the group's other members, Fincher had had experiences making both music videos and commercials. In 1984, he made waves in the industry with a PSA for the American Cancer society that featured a fetus smoking a cigarette. He began getting more jobs as both a music video and commercial director, including a concert/music video feature film with Rick Springfield in 1985 called *The Beat of the Live Drum*. Fincher's talent was apparent. Video producer Beth Broday remembers the day Fincher walked into her office with a reel: "I could see he had a good feel. When I listened to him talk about filmmaking, I knew he was a star. I signed him on the spot. *On the spot*."[18] Immediately Fincher became one of Propaganda's in-house directors.

For producers Steve Golin and Joni Sighvatsson higher profit margins influenced their decision to focus on music videos and commercials. The New York Times published an article in 1990 profiling the two, the author states Propaganda's focus on music videos as a "surprise of many in the movie establishment" because rock videos

were “a realm that most of Hollywood scorns as a low rent district suitable only for those of limited imagination or talent,”[19] Golin detailed their strategy:

> The only game plan we had when we started was to establish a business that was a positive cash flow business, that would give us the ability to be more flexible, to finance our own development on our own terms. Revenue from the video and commercial business is enough to let us survive and to give us a certain credibility with directors who don't want to take a project to a studio.[20]

Sighvatsson continued on how music videos helped develop talent as well:

> We also like the music video business for other reasons, and that has to do with research and development. It's a great training ground for new talent. Music video takes only three days and costs maybe $150,000, so how big a disaster can it really be, even if you put somebody really inexperienced in there? We use video as a training ground, and if the people are good, then we move them into larger projects.[21]

Golin and Sighvatsson envisioned a business that could both provide a steady income and a training ground for high-concept directors who sought to promote their talent to an industry at large. Record labels would foot the bill for video productions, with the directors taking an additional fee for commission. By 1990, the work done for record companies provided revenues of about $20 million a year. 15 to 20% was added in commission for the company’s services.[22] For example, with a budget of about $85,000 for Guns N’ Roses’ *Welcome to the Jungle,* the record label would add an additional $17,000 for a 20% commission.[23] The directors developed relationships with labels and artists, such as Dominic Sena and Janet Jackson, and would work for these enterprises continually. Such consistent revenue could enable the company to take on bigger projects.

Unfortunately, due to various interview request denials and insufficient data in a variety of industry sources, including *Variety*, *Broadcasting and Cable*, and a vast multitude of US and British periodicals, Propaganda's exact start-up costs have yet to be detailed. This has been an unfortunate thread in my Propaganda research, as very little was written about the company during its formative years, let alone information regarding the financial and organizational structures of the company. Dick however has given some vague insight to these initial investments, even though he himself does not recall the exact numbers:

> The initial money…I'm not terribly sure. I think Steve and Jani borrowed some money. Essentially it really didn't take any money at all because, apart from renting an office, David, Dom, Greg, and myself were all freelancers. So we all just stopped working for our various companies on Friday and on Monday morning we were still being commissioned by labels. By the time one of us did the first video under Propaganda, the company had an operating budget. At that point it's just when there's money coming in, we'll use that to pay for the secretary and we wont be paying it to somebody else. We were paying it to ourselves. Steve and Jani just borrowed to pay for the first month's rent, and it sort of went from there.[24]

Jani Sighvatsson recalled the initial financial backing in an interview two decades later: "We started the company with $100,000: Steve and I invested our own money, and the other $75,000 came from people in the garment business. We all shared the same goal: We wanted to make movies. Music videos and commercials were a means to an end."[25] The shortcomings of insufficient data are unfortunate and stem from my limited access to the company's founders.[26] One aspect is certain: Propaganda hit the ground running and produced a prolific amount of music videos within its first year as a company and garnered profits in the process. Its eager filmmakers were ready to keep that ball rolling.

However, music videos and commercials were not a means to an end for everyone involved, and Propaganda's founders often touted rhetoric of collaborative action in retrospect. Nigel Dick saw things differently. "I didn't have a fucking clue as to what I was doing. I was happy to be working. I was sorting out my immigration. One job finished, another one came along. I was hanging out with bands. I was travelling the world. It was an amazing experience," Dick remembers of his first couple of years at Propaganda. "[The other founders] were all different. They always wanted to be filmmakers, as I hadn't. I just stumbled into it, and I enjoyed it and kept on doing it. But I think for David, Dom, and Greg, they saw it as a route to 'Hollywood.'"[27]

These aspirations came with a capitalistic self-awareness. Dominic Sena has claimed to be the one who coined the company "Propaganda Films" after desperate attempts to come up with a name. "It was desperation, because Jani was staring to say, 'Why don't we call the company Blue Ice?' Fincher and I said, 'We gotta come up with a better name than that.' I thought, *That's what we're doing, we're selling propaganda*."[28] Utilizing a friend of Fincher's, Bobby Woods, to create the Russian constructivist logo, the company had officially began branding itself. For Sena, the communist industry was appropriate, "We were very much into the idea of Propaganda being a collective."[29] Thus, as even implied by the company's name, the tensions of art and commerce were inherent in the company's makeup, where commercial work would enable its filmmakers to experiment with and showcase their filmmaking abilities.

During Propaganda's first year as a company, the organization worked out of a simple office loft.[30] After about a year in the loft, Propaganda renovated its own warehouse on 938 North Mansfield Avenue in Hollywood. Dominic Sena remembered the dynamic in the new building: "As soon as one Propaganda director would finish a video, the other directors would check it out and you'd get feedback. It was very

competitive. We always gathered around the cappuccino machine, sharing stories and picking each other's brain."[31] The company renovated the building into a contemporary workplace, whose lobby was a large atrium that often impressed visitors.[32] The allure and appeal of such a space gave Propaganda a visual heft through the building's architecture. Though the space was communal, with each director working under one roof, the visions of what Propaganda could and ought to be were varied. Sena believed that the setting was perfect for artistic progression, for the filmmaker's career, and the company's continued financial stability. "We were growing up and making mistakes and having breakthroughs together," Sena reminisced about Propaganda.[33] Dick saw things differently:

> I think that that comment by [Sena] is bullshit. It was just like, "Hey, Greg. What are you working on today? Oh cool!" You know, "How's he to work with?" To me, that was [as collaborative] as it ever got.[34]

Dick recalls a specific instance of the tension between him and Fincher that illustrated these differences:

> I remember having one of our many meetings. We would have a meeting every week. And David would fly this flag about how things were going to be. I remember him saying we would have an art room with every kind of sharpie we could ever want. It was sort of this idealized filmmakers toy box that he had in mind. From my very practical perspective, I thought that that was never going to work. Somebody will steal all the crayons. Which is pretty much what happened. The reality of it was, we all worked out of the same building but we were all working on our own stuff.[35]

While the collective mindset provided the professional drive to form the company, each founder's desires to further one's own success in the industry still held strong. The clichéd creed of "all for one, one for all" held little water practically.

Already established careers meant Propaganda's filmmakers did not have to start at square one in forming the company. After they left their respective organizations to form Propaganda, the men were still being commissioned by record labels to do video projects. Music videos were defined predominately by their directors, not the companies in which the directors were associated. When A&M Records needed a video for Janet Jackon's single "Let's Wait a While" from her album *Control* in 1987, the label contacted Dominic Sena. This started a relationship between labels, artists, and directors, which would often continue for years. By the time Virgin released the title track for the *Rhythm Nation* album, Jackson already had someone in mind to direct the single's music video. "I knew who I wanted to direct 'Rhythm Nation,' that was simple: Dominic Sena," said Janet Jackson. After working with him on "Let's Wait Awhile," I absolutely fell in love with him. [...] Dominic understood story, and he could put onscreen, from front to back, the whole picture you had in your head."[36] A&M Records financed $1.6 million dollars to produce a series of videos for the album, with "Rhythm Nation" being a component of Jackson's "long-form" music video.[37] Though money was initially tight, projects like Sena's "Rhythm Nation" video would help give Propaganda financial sound footing. "By the time one of us did the first video under Propaganda, the company had an operating budget. At that point it's just when there's money coming in, we'll use that to pay for the secretary and we won't be paying it to somebody else," remembers Nigel Dick about newfound independence. "We were paying it to ourselves. Steve and Jani just borrowed to pay for the first month's rent, and it sort of went from there."[38]

Went from there it did. Directors Dominic Sena, Nigel Dick, Greg Gold, and David Fincher directed upwards of 180 music videos in the first five years.[39] Including commercial spots, the number jumps above 200. Propaganda's prolific output

was because of the extremely quick turnaround of music video productions. Often music videos would film on weekends starting Friday. After a two or three-day shoot, the film was processed and ready to edit by Tuesday. After a week of editing, the first cut of the video would be ready to send off to MTV or whatever broadcast platform was awaiting the content. This efficiency was ideal for an album release, where multiple singles would need videos within a few months.

Propaganda's videos ran on MTV constantly, mostly due to the high profile of many of their recording artist clients. A director's association with a video, at least to MTV's audience, would only go as far as a small credit at the beginning and end of the video, often displayed in small text on the bottom left corner of the screen. Soon Propaganda's filmmakers would be associated with some of the biggest pop and rock stars of the era - Dominic Sena with Janet Jackson, David Fincher with Madonna, Nigel Dick with Guns N' Roses. Other big-name pop stars worked with Propaganda during the period, including Tina Turner, George Michael, Steve Winwood, Billy Idol, Paula Abdul, Toto, Jermaine Stewart, Loverboy, Sting, Bryan Adams, Def Leopard, and White Heat within a three-year period. In 1987, Variety was already calling Propaganda "one of the most active suppliers of music videos"[40] and record executives were quoted in The New York Times stating that "'when it comes to video, Propaganda is clearly the biggest, the best and, because [Steve Golin and Jani Sighvatsson] are such tenacious businessmen, the most expensive. Since Propaganda has consistently delivered results, you don't hear many complaints. People may be reluctant to acknowledge it, but Propaganda had a key hand in making stars of acts like Guns 'n' Roses."[41]

Propaganda also produced an increasing number of television advertisements. The reason was simple: they made more money for the company than music video commissions. "If a music video cost $150,000, you'd make $15,000," remembers Sena

about the profit margins of Propaganda's videos. "Commercials were a quantum leap. One of my first commercials was a perfume ad with Liza Minnelli. They paid me $35,000."[42] The bar for commercial productions had already been set high three years earlier. Ridley Scott's ad for Apple computers based off of Orwell's *1984* had made waves in the advertising industry for its scale and success. Debuting during 1984's Super Bowl, the ad cost $500,000 to produce. "Ninety-six million Americans saw the '1984' commercial," says Steve Hayden, ad company Chiat/Day's vice-president and the commercial's creative director. "It had the highest day-after recall score of any commercial since the beginning of TV. Over 70% of those who saw it recalled the brand and the message."[43] Scott's influence on Propaganda's stylization went beyond advertising. His film *Blade Runner* (1982) held a distinctive style that would come to influence a generation of young filmmakers. As I discuss in detail in the following chapter, that influence would be an almost defining trope for Propaganda's work in both advertising and commercials, where aesthetics took on a *Blade-Runner*-like dystopian feel.

*Blade Runner* would influence David Fincher heavily, as evidenced by this Japanese commercial for Coca Cola in 1993. Borrowing heavily from Scott's film, the 60-second spot featured a rollerblade-wearing gang of young men zooming through a dirty and foggy futuristic city street at night lit by an assortment of bright technicolored neon signs. The ad was just one example for the global brands that Fincher and others created while at Propaganda, including Nike, AT&T, YM magazine, and Budweiser. According to his peers, David Fincher was the driving force behind venturing into the commercial business. "He was very supportive creatively," remembers Greg Gold. "On the business side, though, he was tough and strong-willed. He knew what he wanted and stuck to his guns. There was no defense against him"[44] Fincher was known to have a

stubborn unfriendly disposition when working. His disciplined and unique vision for his work in both the music video and advertising industries made him a hot item. A retrospective of Fincher's commercial work in Adweek, the advertising industry's leading trade-magazine, heralded Fincher for not "going through the motions. Many of Fincher's ads are industry classics that helped redefine the level of storytelling that you could cram into a commercial."[45]

As Justin Wyatt states in *High Concept*, these advertising campaigns "follow the design specification of corporate communications, in which the designer seeks to create and maintain consistent identities across advertising campaigns for corporations."[46] Propaganda's distinctive authorial vision ultimately translated well into compelling and visually striking advertisements. If Propaganda's filmmakers were to be considered "designers," it was their job to utilize their own particular styles in service of corporate branding. After three years of success, corporations were more and more willing to utilize the now-proven Propaganda directors for their own brands. Advertising productions increased after Polygram's acquiring of Propaganda in 1991, but the seeds of this trend were firmly planted during Propaganda's early music video years. Fincher, Sena, and Dick, by the end of their tenure at Propaganda in the mid-nineties, would all have had ample experience in commercial filmmaking. Latecomers to the Propaganda office, filmmakers Michael Bay, Spike Jonze, and Mark Romenek, would also begin shooting their own commercials with the company after their own arrival. Again, television advertisement's lucrative nature was enough to have Propaganda's filmmakers eager for advertising projects.

Though advertisements were usually shorter than music videos, commercials almost always had longer production schedules. Television commercial productions were often the result of month's long projects that include teams of people from a number of

organizations, including advertising agencies, corporate clients, and Propaganda's own production crew. Productions could take a week to shoot (often for a 30-second spot) and the casting process was often drawn out, with clients and producers trying to see what actros would best fit the brand. [47] "By and large when you do a music video, you pitch your idea, you may have to go in and have a meeting and talk it through with a manager, a couple of people from the label, and the lead singer of the band or something, and then you're off to the races. You go and you shoot it," remembers Nigel Dick. [48] Commercials would have multiple pre-production meetings with upwards of two-dozen people in attendance. Everyone would try to have a say about how a final commercial spot would look. Often brands, advertising creative, and Propaganda's filmmakers had varying opinions on how a product should be sold, what mood fits that product, and how a particular campaign fits into a larger brand narrative.

**THE VIDEO-MAKING PROCESS: "WELCOME TO THE JUNGLE"**

When historicizing Propaganda's output, often the focus has been on the recording artists and the music video directors, as evidenced by the auteur-driven chronicling of the company's history in books like *I Want My MTV* or in other retrospective interviews. However, little has been said about Propaganda's *process* of music video production. Music video production does give insight to structure of Propaganda's process and details the appeal of the company's work ethic: an efficient yet creative production house that can effectively and capably turn out a product that would help spur the recording artist's continued success. This production history will not touch on the aesthetic make-up of the video, which I discuss in detail in Chapter 3. However, this case illustrates the mechanics behind Propaganda's operations. My reason behind detailing *Welcome to the Jungle* is due to my personal access with Nigel Dick and the

project's scale, which eventually boosted *Guns N' Roses'* own success and became a staple on MTV.

By the fall of 1987, Nigel Dick had already made a number of music videos for the band Great White, featuring the songs "Rock Me" and "Lady Red Light" which were both released earlier that year. Great White was managed by New Zealander Alan Niven, who had recently begun to manage the American band Guns N' Roses, who he felt had the talent and charisma to make waves around the country and potentially around the world. Niven felt a music video for the band's lead single "Welcome to the Jungle," off their album *Appetite for Destruction* distributed by Geffen records, helped further propel the band into stardom. Niven approached Dick for the video, who had already made videos for Niven's other band Great White. "He played me the track, which I didn't like, and I turned him down," admits Dick. "Then he came back to me and says, 'Look, you got to help me out. I can't find anybody else to do this.' Whether people were turning him down or whether he was turning them down, I don't know."[49] Dick admits that his association with Propaganda, at least in that early period of the company, was not the main reason behind why Nevins wanted to work with the director:

> It was just like, "I work with you, Nigel. I like the work that you do. I like your process. Here's another job." I think eventually people were getting work because they were associated with Propaganda, but because I was there from the beginning, I was sort of immune to that. I was just getting work because I was getting work.

Despite still being reluctant to shoot the video, Dick agreed. However, because he was busy shooting a third video for Great White, Dick had a request about the production: to combine the Great White video shoot with Guns N' Roses' in order to make the equipment rental process simpler and utilize the same crew for both videos. Often, music videos were shot on weekends, where production equipment could be rented on a Friday

and given back on a Monday with only one day's worth of rental fees, as the rental house did not count weekends in rental periods. "So we shot Great White on Thursday and Friday and we shot 'Welcome to the Jungle' on Saturday and Sunday," remembers Dick about the quick turnaround of both productions. "We just made it like we were making a TV show or a movie. Tomorrow's scene involves [Guns N' Roses guitarist] Slash and today's scene involves [Great Whites'] Jack Russell. We'll save a bit of money of just keeping the same production team through both jobs."[50] [51] Ultimately the budget for "Welcome to the Jungle" was around $85,000 as Nigel Dick recalls.[52] "At any one time there is a median price that labels feel any new or 'developing artist' should have as their budget," Dick describes. "That price will vary up or down depending on how much faith the label has in the act and how powerful the band's management is."[53] For a developing artist, "Welcome to the Jungle's" $85,000 was a good pool. Guns N' Roses were a band with good commercial potential.[54]

The band, with much help from manager Niven, formulated the concept and narrative of the music video, in which a new-to-the-city Axl Rose gets off a bus from his rural home town and enters the dark and grungy "jungle" of the inner city. Niven would sit down with the band to discuss how the video should be. Niven's guidance was important as the band had many issues at the time, including drug use and a general lack of respect for much authority. Each party molded each step of the video's planning and layout, with Niven formulating a cohesive narrative from the band's suggestions and Dick storyboarding and visualizing that narrative for a music video. Niven laid out the progression for Dick: The video would begin with Axl getting off of a bus. After Axl exits the bus, he would see Slash drinking alcohol from a paper bag (which apparently was how the two actually first met). Then Axl would look into a store window and see a TV screen, which then transitions to Axl sitting in a chair – an homage to David Bowie in

*The Man Who Fell to Earth* (1976). It was up to Dick ensure that the band and Niven's vision was accurately translated to the screen.

The production took only two days, with a majority of the shoot involving a mock live performance featuring an elaborate stage setup and a large enthusiastic crowd. The crew built a stage in a large Hollywood studio. Because of Guns N' Roses already established fan base, it was not hard to get a large crowd of rowdy and excited fans for the shoot. "We would just open the doors and say, 'Come down. Be in the video.' It would be like, 'Wow! It's a free gig!'" recalls Dick of the crowd's enthusiasm.[55] Cinematographer Joe Yacoe filled the sets with high-contrast lighting, helping to enhance the seediness of the urban surroundings. The video's shooting script, written up by Dick after his meeting with Niven, had a rough outline of the video's various tableaus with small notes that pertained to the production schedule. The concert performance was to be shot on the first of two days. Dick attempted to make the ultimate live-performance setting: "I just wanted to be in a rock band, so this was the closest I was gonna get to playing the big festival stage. I would design the set, and they would rip it off and use it on their stage, which I found very flattering."[56]

The more elaborate narrative pieces would be shot with Axl on the second day. The following excerpt from the video's shooting treatment explains the store window television scene, labeled "PART THREE" of the treatment. Indicative of Dick's unfamiliarity with the band's members was the fact that he misspells Axl Roses' name:

> Axel's POV of the television store window. There are a number of TV sets all showing various scenes of violence, civil unrest, contemporary advertising etc. These pieces of footage would need to be obtained from a library. The TV ads could be anything from the last 5 years but does not need to show package shots or product names. All the TV sets should be different. I would suggest we build this window on a set. (To be shot in a studio day 2).[57]

This narrative moment, as well as the others throughout the video, was to be intercut with live performance footage. Dick was a former musician, and consequently live performance is crucial to his music videos. Through performance, Dick felt the true "essence" of an artist could come through, showcasing their music-making talents to a live or broadcast audience.

Once shooting was completed on Sunday, editing the video began almost immediately. The length of the post-production process has changed little in the decades since, with about a week given for the first cut. The editing was usually completed in Propaganda's own editing suites, which contained the latest state-of-the-art editing equipment.[58] Dick admits he was a bit too hands-on with the editing process, often directly dictating to editor Curtis Clayton where cuts should be made and what shots would go together. "The editor would sort of roll his eyes and on some level I can see it was very painful for [him]," remembers Dick. "Eventually [in later years], out of sheer boredom I would say, 'Here's the footage now go away and put it together and I'll see you on Friday,' Now it's come completely full circle and I edit my stuff now."[59] All in all, the complete production process from beginning of shooting to the completion of the first cut was about a week. With this efficiency, Dick was able to juggle multiple projects at once and pump out his 26 credited music videos in 1988. Things only got bigger from there.

However, completing the video edit was not the end of the process. First came the band and record label approval, which often came quickly as both were involved with the pre-production and production process. Sometimes, band members would be allowed to view early cuts but this was avoided as it often delayed the process.[60] More importantly, the video had to be approved by MTV in order to get broadcasted, giving the network power over Propaganda's output and dictating what

would be ultimately shown to audiences. This approval was of course pivotal to a video's success, as without the MTV platform an artist's music video would mean nothing with no one watching them. According to Dick, *Welcome to the Jungle* hit a number of bumps before going on air:

> There's a lot of violence in [the video]. There was policeman beating people in the head with a stick and whatnot. Then there was an undercurrent of fans and whatnot, and they agreed that they would only play it after 9 o'clock at night. So it was being played at night. And obviously they were hip to the fact that people wanted to see it, so they felt the necessity to play it but they were worried about moms and dads ringing up, "This is horrendous. These young people…blah blah blah blah."[61]

So despite a proclaimed independence to make music videos on their own aesthetic terms, Propaganda was still at the mercy of MTV's approval process. Two years earlier, Tom Petty's video for "Don't Come Around Here No More" received backlash for a scene depicting Petty cutting into a young actress as if she was a cake. The video's director, Jeff Stein, claimed that image is what pushed Tipper Gore to start PMRC, the Parents Music Resource Center, which hoped to increase parental control over the access of children to music and music videos. Apparently, Gore's daughter saw the video and it freaked her out.[62] In light of this organized backlash, MTV was nervous about harsh content like that in "Welcome to the Jungle." MTV decided to broadcast the video late at night. Despite this, the video was popular, getting requested repeatedly throughout any given day. This popularity helped propel the band to greater stardom and would still be one of the most viewed videos on MTV.com still twenty years later.[63] The following year, the video would win the Best New Artist Video at the MTV Music Video Awards. After this acclaim, the station was willing to play the video during prime-time hours.

Despite the station's initial reluctance, Nigel Dick feels the corporate influence is just a part of the filmmaking process. The more you play a part in a media system, the

more you are at the mercy of those parties involved. MTV and other media companies were *still* determining how to confront a vastly changing media-scape. Artistic freedom directly correlated to the economics of the business, where a director's aesthetics had to match the desires of financial backers. Yet for Dick himself, there was still a feeling of freedom in his rock and roll infused filmmaking career. "And actually [with] music videos, you'll have much more freedom than you would have with TV shows or films or with commercials," Dick states. "So unless you're using your own money, chances are you got to listen to the man. You know, that's just the way it is."[64]

**CONCLUSION - A NEW FORM OF PROPAGANDA**

With the continued intent to produce feature films, Golin and Sighvatsson began having talks with Polygram Filmed Entertainment in 1989. Polygram had begun to make its own move to diversify its content after decades in the recording industry. Golin and Sighvatsson's deal with Polygram called for the company to pay for Propaganda's production costs in return for a share in film revenues. The arrangement gave Propaganda access to $40 million, which enabled them to produce more feature-length content.[65] For Propaganda, the deal with Polygram still was at odds with the Hollywood studio oligopoly. Propaganda continued to seek talent that did not represent the Hollywood norm. Rather, innovative directors like David Lynch, who would soon work with Propaganda, appealed to their own independent and alternative sensibilities. "It's not necessarily that we don't want to do business with the mainstream directors, but we can't compete with the studios," Sighvatsson said in 1990 after the Polygram deal. "We can't pay the $5 million fees or gross deals or whatever. Personally, we are more comfortable with an arrangement like this, that will allow us to make two or three $10 million to $15

million movies a year."[66] With revenues at the end of that year around $80 million, it would be easy to keep up the pace.[67]

The ever-diversifying make-up of Propaganda's content made Golin and Sighvatsson aware of new opportunities in the industry. A sale to Polygram would help provide financial support and corporate structure that would enable Golin to venture into quality independent feature filmmaking. This "independence" from the Hollywood majors could be achieved through its willingly limited production strategies. Quality overruled quantity. Steve Golin would have the production house he always wanted, where quality cinema could be produced in an efficient and profitable manner.

With a steady number of music video and commercial commissions and a new relationship with Polygram, Propaganda was poised to enter a recently invigorated independent feature marketplace and continued to seek out talent to support. The most notable talent Propaganda wooed was director David Lynch, who had already made a name for himself over the past decade with the feature films such as *Eraserhead* (1977), *The Elephant Man* (1980), and *Blue Velvet* (1986). Lynch already had a loose relationship with Propaganda through his friendship with Monty Montgomery, who helped produce Twin Peaks. In 1988, Montgomery let Lynch borrow his copy of Barry Gifford's novel *Wild at Heart* to gauge whether it would make a good film. Lynch fell in love with the book and immediately decided it was a project he would like to work on. Montgomery was happy to pass the project along. This would be a great opportunity for Propaganda to be involved with a respected American director. Golin, Sighvatsson, and producer Monty Montgomery were "all pumped up about it," remembered Lynch. "I told them that I wanted to rewrite some stuff but that, while I was writing, maybe they wanted to get started on it and then we'd be underway. It was one of those things that once it started it was like a fire. It just burst into being."[68] This enthusiasm for the project paid

off, as *Wild at Heart* won the Palme d'Or at the Cannes Film Festival. Propaganda had now received international acclaim from a highly respected film organization.

Propaganda's intention to enter the feature-film market was boosted by Hollywood's own support for indie filmmaking. This desire mixed with the already commercial nature of MTV broadcast indicates Propaganda's willingness to incorporate itself into the system rather than push against it. Alisa Perren's discussion of this era in *Indie Inc*. speaks of the notion of commerce overcoming art or the "move away from a particular strand of 1980s-era, art-house-oriented independents and toward Hollywood practices and conventions."[69] Indies "are viewed as 'brands' that exploit naïve or gullible consumers with their vacuous products."[70] Propaganda never positioned itself as outsiders, but rather a hopeful and eager insider what would use the era's convergent media industries to make a name for itself and its filmmakers. Without the focus on music videos and commercials, Propaganda would have never been as sustainable as it became. While Golin had continued to herald music videos as merely a means to an end, the content produced by the company had elevated music videos and television advertisements towards a respectable and worthwhile form of visual production that would influence future directors such as Spike Jonze, Mark Romenek, Chris Cunningham, Michel Gondry, and Hype Williams.

For some, the focus of feature filmmaking and the purchase by Polygram was the beginning of the end. The inherent dichotomy of art and commerce had begun to lean towards commerce. Though the company continued to produce innovative music videos, television advertisements, and feature films some believed that the glory days had ended and the initial excitement had dulled to professional obligation. For Nigel Dick, it was a surreal cycle, as he had introduced Polygram's Michael Kuhn to Golin and Sighvatsson after leaving Polygram to join Propaganda. As Dick remembers, Polygram's presence

marked the arrival of the "bean-counters." Propaganda's usual and continuous profit margin was not good enough for the new owners. "I believed that when we started Propaganda, that it was the six musketeers. One for all and all for one," Nigel Dick reminisces. "That was the agreed mantra. We're all in this together." For Dick, the success that Propaganda's founders hoped for would come to represent the end of the company's independence. "Suddenly," laments Dick, "it was just like working for any other film company."[71]

*Chapter 2 Endnotes*

[1] VH1 would later take up the mantle as keep of music video history and replay MTV's early videos in subsequent decades into the early 2000s. VH1's curation of music videohistory through easily programmed countdown shows and behind the scenes specials such as *Pop-up Video* were the beginning of my own interest in music videos as a child watching the channel constantly throughout the day.

[2] The MTV Video Award trophy, the "Moonman," was of course fashioned after the now synonymous moon-landing intro of MTV's first broadcast.

[3] MTV has a majority of its awards voted on by fans. However, the a group of industry members vote on "professional categories" - Best Cinematography, Best Editing, Best Choreography, Best Direction, Best Art Direction, and Best Visual Effects. MTV keeps the body of this voting population secret and has never disclosed its nature to the public.

[4] Kevin Williams, *Why I [Still] Want My MTV* (Creskill: Hampton Press, Inc., 2003), 1.

[5] Some of these songs were "Flashdance…What A Feeling" by Irene Cera and "Maniac" by Michael Sembello for *Flashdance* and "Take My Breath Away" by Berlin and "Danger Zone" by Kenny Loggins for *Top Gun*.

[6] Stephen Prince, *A New Pot of Gold: Hollywood Under the Electric Rainbow, 1980-1989* (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 2000), 133.

[7] Quoted in "Flashdance' Film, LP Feeding Off Each Other," *Variety*, May 11, 1983, 3. http://www.billboard.com/magazine-archive (February 9 2015)

[8] Sarah Benet-Weiser, *Authentic: The Politics of Ambivalence in Brand Culture,* (New York City; New York University Press, 2012), 29.

[9] Quoted in Ibid., 32

[10] Quoted in Justin Wyatt, *High Concept* (Austin; University of Texas Press, 1994), 44

[11] Ibid., 45

[12] Larry Rohther, "For 2 Producers, Their Way Is the Right Way," *New York Times,* October 14, 1990, 13.

[13] "Steve Golin," Hollywood.com, accessed February 21 2015, https://archive.today/20130125113040/http://www.hollywood.com/celebrity/189959/Steve_Golin

[14] Nigel Dick (Propaganda filmmaker) in discussion with the author, February 2015.

[15] Ibid.

[16] Steve Golin, interview by Association des Producteurs de Cinema, *P@P*, YouTube.com, January 27th 2013, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=9Yx5oPfuNMg

[17] Nigel Dick (Propaganda filmmaker) in discussion with the author, February 2015.

[18] Quoted in Craig Marks and Rob Tannenbaum, *I Want My MTV: The Uncensored Story of the Music Video Revolution* (New York City; Penguin Books, 2011), ebook.

[19] Larry Rohther, "For 2 Producers, Their Way Is the Right Way," *New York Times,* October 14, 1990, 13.

[20] Ibid., 13

[21] Ibid., 13

[22] Larry Rohther, "For 2 Producers, Their Way Is the Right Way," *New York Times,* October 14, 1990, 13.

[23] Nigel Dick (Propaganda filmmaker) in discussion with the author, April 2015.

[24] Nigel Dick (Propaganda filmmaker) in discussion with the author, February 2015.

[25] Quoted in Craig Marks and Rob Tannenbaum, *I Want My MTV: The Uncensored Story of the Music Video Revolution* (New York City; Penguin Books, 2011), ebook.

[26] After repeated attempts, Dominic Sena, Steve Golin, Jani Sighvatsson, David Fincher, and Greg Gold have all declined to be interviewed despite initial interest. Their reasoning was likely due to my thesis being too small a platform to tell *their* story. This has served as a reminder to me that often historical narratives are themselves shaped and told only to those who would provide a large enough platform to get the story out there.

[27] Nigel Dick (Propaganda filmmaker) in discussion with the author, February 2015.

[28] Quoted in Craig Marks and Rob Tannenbaum, *I Want My MTV: The Uncensored Story of the Music Video Revolution* (New York City; Penguin Books, 2011), ebook.

[29] Ibid., ebook.

[30] I have not been able to verify the address to this first location.

[31] Quoted in Craig Marks and Rob Tannenbaum, *I Want My MTV: The Uncensored Story of the Music Video Revolution* (New York City; Penguin Books, 2011), ebook.

[32] Michael Meads, "940 N. Mansfield Avenue, Hollywood," *Lala Land: From the Journal of Michael Meads,* accessed April 19 2015, September 11 2001, < http://mymeowmeow.tv/blog/?p=1512>

[33] Ibid., ebook.

[34] Nigel Dick (Propaganda filmmaker) in discussion with the author, February 2015

[35] Ibid., interview.

[36] Ibid., ebook.

[37] Jefferson Graham, "Janet take control again in new video," *USA Today,* accessed April 3 2015, September 14 1989, 1D.

[38] Nigel Dick (Propaganda filmmaker) in discussion with the author, February 2015.

[39] Surprisingly, one of the more difficult hurdles I've had to overcome in my research was compiling a definitive list of Propaganda's works during this

period. There is no trustworthy source that labels them, and when I asked Propaganda's filmmakers, they were unaware of where a list like that would be. See the APPENDIX for my compiled Propaganda music video filmography. Unfortunately, without documentation, there was no way for me to compile a list of television advertisements prior to the completion of my thesis project.

[40] "'Top Of The Pops' Syndie Sked Reworked As CBS Latenight Entry," *Variety*, July 1, 1987, 131.

[41] Larry Rohther, "For 2 Producers, Their Way Is the Right Way," *New York Times,* October 14 1990, 13.

[42]Quoted in Craig Marks and Rob Tannenbaum, *I Want My MTV: The Uncensored Story of the Music Video Revolution* (New York City; Penguin Books, 2011), ebook.

[43] Quoted in Tom Shea, "Madison Avenue Turns to High Tech," *InfoWorld,* March 5 1984, 68.

[44] Ibid., ebook.

[45] "10 Great TV Spots Directed by David Fincher," AdWeek, accessed February 27, 2015, http://www.adweek.com/adfreak/10-great-tv-spots-directed-david-fincher-139646

[46] Justin Wyatt, *High Concept* (Austin; University of Texas Press, 1994), 24

[47] Even though the casting process was lengthy, often each potential candidate was either a model or well-known celebrity. Sometimes these cast-members would have their future careers started in a Propaganda commercial, such as Angelina Jolie's star presence in the 1991 YM magazine spot directed by David Fincher.

[48] Nigel Dick (Propaganda filmmaker) in discussion with the author, February 2015.

[49] Ibid., interview

[50] Ibid., interview.

[51] As to what amount was saved is unsure, as record labels varied in their commitment to music video productions. Also, as of this writing, the budget for "Welcome to the Jungle" has not been explicitly published. However, my research indicates that the production cost at least $75,000 to produce.

[52] Nigel Dick (Propaganda filmmaker) in discussion with the author, April 2015.

[53] Ibid., interview.

[54] According to Dick, the entry level around the year 2000 averaged to around $300,000. Today, thanks in large part to online streaming, a developing artist's budget would be around $3,000.

[55] Ibid., interview.

[56] Ibid., interview

[57] Nigel Dick, *Welcome to the Jungle,* July 1987, accessed February 28, 2015, music video treatment, nigeldick.com/conceptual

[58] Michael Heldman (Propaganda editor) in discussion with the author, March 2015.

[59] Nigel Dick (Propaganda filmmaker) in discussion with the author, February 2015.
[60] Michael Heldman (Propaganda editor) in discussion with the author, March 2015.
[61] Ibid., interview.
[62] Quoted in Craig Marks and Rob Tannenbaum, *I Want My MTV: The Uncensored Story of the Music Video Revolution* (New York City; Penguin Books, 2011), ebook.
[63] Daniel Murphy, "Uh, These Are the Five Most Popular Music Videos on MTV.com?" Esquire, November 14, 2008, accessed February 28, 2015, http://www.esquire.com/entertainment/music/videos/a5367/five-most-popular-videos-on-mtv-111408/
[64] Nigel Dick (Propaganda filmmaker) in discussion with the author, February 2015.
[65] Larry Rohther, "For 2 Producers, Their Way Is the Right Way," *New York Times,* October 14 1990, 13.
[66] Ibid., 13.
[67] Ibid., 13.
[68] David Lynch and Chris Rodley, *Lynch on Lynch* (New York; Faber and Faber, 2005), 195
[69] Alisa Perren, *Indie Inc.* (Austin; University of Texas Press, 2012), 9
[70] Ibid., 9
[71] Nigel Dick (Propaganda filmmaker) in discussion with the author, February 2015.

# Chapter 3:

## "Sometimes it's enough to just have style":

## *Modes of Style in Propaganda's Productions, 1986-1991*

By the time Propaganda was formed in 1986, the music video aesthetic had already begun to spread beyond MTV. The film *Flashdance* (1983), undoubtedly inspired MTV's rise a couple of years prior to its release, came accompanied with four music videos edited by the film's director Adrian Lyne: "What a Feeling," "Imagination," "Maniac," and "Romeo." Each video featured clips from the film, such as dance performances or brief glimpses of narrative drama. In the summer of 1986, Tony Scott's *Top Gun* mixed Kenny Loggins' upbeat and high-energy pop soundtrack with the kinetic imagery of jets in flight and beautiful bodies in motion. Kenny Loggins' music video for the Top Gun single "Danger Zone" largely featured images of the film intercut with Loggins' vocal performance in a sun-soaked bedroom. As Paramount's senior vice-president stated during the period, "If you have a single playing on the radio, the spots are like cross-pollination," providing a new means to promote the films and their soundtrack in order to reinforce the consumer's need to either have or see them all.[1] However, MTV became strict about music videos being too overt with their promotional nature. The network rejected Bob Seger's video for "Old Time Rock and Roll" because footage from the film *Risky Business* (1983) was too prominent, prompting an MTV executive to say that the video was "a trailer set to a Bob Seger song." Once, concert footage was added, MTV accepted the video.[2] Hollywood studios began utilizing MTV for film promotion, such as Phil Collin's video for "Against All Odds" from the film of the same name. Columbia Pictures spent forty-five thousand dollars on the video and built a completely new set to match the film's imagery.[3]

While the promotional nature of videos was always apparent, their aesthetics merit further analysis. But in which perspective must we base these formal observations? As I have argued in past chapters, music videos have been both a response to and influence on convergent media industries where producers blur the lines between content platforms to serve niche demographics. However, when studying music video aesthetics, scholars are often obligated to shepherd their ideas under the particular umbrella of audio-studies. As Andrew Goodwin and Lawrence Grossberg state in the introduction to Sound and Vision's *Music Video Reader,* their focus is to isolate an engagement with music video aesthetics within the realm of popular music. Their collection's "concerns originate in the [various] contributor's understanding of the place of music video in the popular music industry, and the social relations of production and consumption that center on that cultural apparatus."[4] For these scholars music videos are an extension of the music itself, a result of this audio-textual foundation. Scholar Carol Vernallis shares this perspective. Her book *Experiencing Music Videos* is one of the few substantial texts dealing with music video aesthetics. For Sight and Sound and other scholars such as Vernallis, audio guides visual components. In other words, it is song over visuals, as the visual content would not exist without the precedence of the song. I believe this is a limiting perspective in that it neglects the visual production of the video itself, where images and themes convey something beyond song and lyrics. Propaganda's filmmakers had little to no experience in music recording, but their filmmaking skills undoubtedly contributed aesthetic components on their own. As Nigel Dick stated in the previous chapter, his role was often one of translator, taking basic concepts and molding them with cinematic techniques and methods in order to create product that would appease the artist, potential broadcasters, and current or future fans. For Dick specifically, these "translations" were an opportunity to showcase stylistic filmmaking that would support

Propaganda's creative output. This use of cinematic style as a branding technique was shared by all of Propaganda's filmmakers, who each left their own mark on the music video medium.

Advertising was another means in which Propaganda's filmmakers could showcase their visual strengths. Unlike music videos, advertisements do not have to follow an audial foundation. Rather, a brand message serves as the foundational text. Often brand messages were developed as television advertisements were conceptualized and produced. As advertising scholar Roland Marchand describes advertising and its reflection of present, visual texts "often found expression in styles and appeals that catered to yearnings unfulfilled by efficient, rationalized mass production and distribution" and reflected "subjective qualities."[5] Propaganda's content often subverted ideas of mass production and distribution with subjective style, a style also present in its music videos. The same formal components were also present in television advertising, and Propaganda's filmmakers often comfortable going between the two types of content forms. My formal analysis takes into account both commercial and formal elements of music video and television commercial production, because these varying elements are inherently linked within this promotional work.

My research engages Propaganda's visual content, particularly a deployment of a visual style that came to define the company as the go-to source for visually striking music videos and television advertisements. Janet Jackson's relationship and admiration for Dominic Sena's work was an example of an artist's trust in Propaganda's ability to develop high-concept and provocative visual representations of their pop star persona, a perspective that would fit comfortably within branding discourse, where products and services took the place of music celebrity. These conceptual strengths, while of course infused with the intentions of the pop artist or corporate client, enabled Propaganda's

filmmakers experiment and utilize various cinematic tropes. While "Rhythm Nation" the song may have melodic, rhythmic, and lyrical components, the music video for "Rhythm Nation" goes beyond these musical delineations to create an audio-visual collage of music, fashion, dance, and persona.

Using formal analysis of Propaganda Films' content from its creation in 1986 to its purchase by Polygram Entertainment in 1991, my research aims to identify the most prominent aesthetic techniques, or as I call them "modes of style," of a curated selection of Propaganda's music videos and television advertising during this period. I argue that Propaganda's visual style stems from cinematic formal qualities, but only to a point. First and foremost, they were a means to showcase capable filmmaking talent. Such talent enabled continued success in a variety of industries. As a result of watching a large number Propaganda's work in music videos and television advertisements, I have selected four formal components that I feel were central in developing and showcasing Propaganda's particular visual makeup. These four elements were present in almost all of Propaganda's output, and I argue that they represent Propaganda's aesthetic makeup. Propaganda was a content-making brand that specialized in these short-form visually intriguing texts, and I attribute that branding to lighting, editing, production design, and casting.

While many other aesthetic components can be assessed, I argue that these four modes are the core of Propaganda's pervasive style because of their role in physically and temporally shaping a pop star's physical presence and thematic makeup, at least within a single video. The chiaroscuro trends of lighting during the period are reminiscent of a cinematic history of film noir and suspense. Shadows are just as viable a component of the visual spectrum as light and Propaganda continuously placed its subjects in the shadows. Music video editing, with its faster rhythm and melodious pacing, began to

shape Hollywood as well as television content. It gave energy and visibility to the otherwise invisible art of film editing and created new visually aggressive rhythms towards musically kinetic content. However, this visibility was sometimes neglected in television advertisements, when simple direct address was key to conveying a product's branding message. Production design also harkened back to cinema's own history, with the dystopian worlds of Fritz Lang inspiring Madonna's own industrial society in her "Express Yourself" video. The urban and industrial fantasies of modern life were put on display in Propaganda's works, with the artist often becoming a master of that domain. Finally, casting in Propaganda's videos was not as simple as placing a pop star on screen. Sometimes, pop stars were absent from their created worlds, leaving beautiful young bodies as its main inhabitants. Whoever was present, their command of attention through physique and choreography gave life to dark and sexy locales. These traits give a sense of narration, but gender role's relation to the pop artist often determined those structures. Even with this limited abstraction, a music video's promotional intentions still rang through. Hence MTV's own caution in broadcasting overtly commercial work and undermining the illusion of creative expression. Obviously in television advertisements, these promotional presentations were overt. That corporate directness was by no means a deterrent to Propaganda's willingness to display innovative style.

To engage Propaganda Film's visual style during its first 5 years, I compiled a sample of fifteen music videos and four commercials from a number of Propaganda's directors (See APPENDIX: PROPAGANDA SAMPLE for a listing of videos and commercials used). These particular music videos were chosen because they represent an even distribution of work done with Propaganda's three prevalent directors: Nigel Dick, Dominic Sena, and David Fincher. The two outliers in my sample are Julian Temple and Michael Bay, which represent Propaganda's earliest work as a company and the

beginning of the Polygram influence respectively. Also, my sample was selected to have an even distribution form year to year, with roughly three videos per year in the five-year period in order to not privilege particular periods in my timeline. Some artists have multiple videos within the sample, such as Madonna, Janet Jackson, and Guns N' Roses (two each with the director being consistent for each artist) while others, such as David Bowie, have only made one music video with the studio. All content was produced in-house by Propaganda and includes recording artists David Bowie, Madonna, Janet Jackson, Toto, Guns N' Roses, Paula Abdul, Tina Tuner, Bryan Adams, Billy Idol, Styx, Divinyls, and Toto.

The inclusion of television advertising in my sample, featuring the brands of Este Lauder, Nike, YM Magazine, and Colt 45, serves to incorporate other non-feature film text into my study. Television advertisements by Propaganda during this period were difficult to find, and my sampling has been largely dictated by what was available on online video databases such as Adweek and YouTube. In other words, I could only access the ads that I was able to view and could verify as Propaganda advertisements. The higher amount music videos in the sample relates to Propaganda's higher number of music video productions compared to television ads during the five-year period of my study. The sample reflects these limitations. My advertising sample leans towards the latter half of my five-year bracket as Propaganda's advertising work picked up significantly in 1990 as talks began with Polygram. During this period, David Fincher and Dominic Sena were the company's two leading advertising directors, and my sampling reflects this with two television advertisements made by each director. As PolyGram bought out the company in 1991, the number of commercial productions increased dramatically because of the increased income the deal provided. Though a

limited sample, television advertisement's inclusion in this analysis is an important component in engaging Propaganda's visual style for its in-house directors.

My methods are partially inspired by the work of David Bordwell, Kristin Thompson, and Janet Staiger in *The Classical Hollywood Cinema: Film Style & Mode of Production to 1960* in that this survey of Propaganda Film's music videos hopes to argue for a "coherent system whereby aesthetic norms and the mode of film production reinforced one another." Like Bordwell, Staiger, and Thompson, my analysis involved watching many of Propaganda's works and discerning similarities between them - a consistent style largely reflective of directorial intent - that indicate a visual amplification of pop stars and corporate brands.

Music videos may indeed "follow" a song, to use Carol Vernallis' term, but they also provided a visual accompaniment that in the MTV age could become the primary mode in which viewers/listeners may first come to contact with the artist or song. Propaganda Films' curation and utilization of its young talent is a vital component of music video's place in established filmmaking traditions. Style then becomes a means through which to differentiate a product within competitive capitalistic industries. Music videos are both a visually compelling way to promote albums sales and a method in which Propaganda's directors can showcase their own talents. My concerns are with the former but are inevitably linked to the latter.

Propaganda's founders have spoken in interviews of the collaborative nature of their endeavor and a sense of communal aspirations towards opportunities in feature filmmaking. Does the visual components of their collective work, across a wide array of music genres and various iconic pop stars, support this claim to a unified "Propaganda" mode of style? Even if collaboration was heralded in retrospect, my analysis indicates a consensual understanding of promotional filmmaking's potential to showcase provocative

imagery. Though these works would come to be known as David Fincher, Michael Bay, or Dominic Sena videos, they were also identified as *Propaganda videos* and that acclaim helped the company succeed for over a decade. This collective identification became a means in which to encourage progressive filmmaking practices in otherwise commercial ventures. "Editors and cameraman would hang out [in our studio.] We were growing up and making mistakes and having breakthroughs together," claims director Dominic Sena.[6] By looking at the four stylistic components of Propaganda's work, I hope to define Propaganda's style in this period amongst a variety of filmmakers. I argue these stylistic traits are what supported Propaganda's stance as the leading visionary of short-form television program aesthetics. As one advertising industry member noted after Propaganda's closing in 2001, "They really were, and maybe still are, the only real brand we've had in this business."[7]

**PROPAGANDA AND BRAND AESTHETICS**

Propaganda's approach towards its content output was to utilize music videos and commercials as a means to showcase its own innovative filmmaking talent. Propaganda's filmmakers indicated this capability in two ways. The first is an ability to efficiently manage the production process from conceptualization to distribution. Propaganda's filmmakers, with the benefit of having previous experience in making these forms of content, were able to turn around productions quickly and efficiently. This enabled them to undertake dozens of projects in a given year. Record labels, advertising agencies, and various clients appreciated such efficiency as their budgets and precious products (artists) could be trusted with such capable workers. The previous chapter detailed this process and chronicled the various ways Propaganda's methods were perceived by the industry and their own employees. The second means of promoting Propaganda's talent was the

visual and stylistic make-up of the content itself. This is by far the most apparent indication of talent and capability, as it is "front-facing" and willingly and eagerly constructed to gain attention from viewers and other possible clients. Janet Jackson's appraisal for Sena's ability to put "the whole picture you had in your head" on-screen indicates an ability to translate concepts into visual and cinematic components ready for display. During Propaganda's formative years in the late eighties, these videos were often provocative, energetic, and sexy. They had an allure that stood apart from other forms of television broadcast content. And sometimes, particularly with videos like George Michael's "Freedom! 90" and Billy Idol's "Cradle of Love," these texts would become more notable than their pop-song counterparts. Gone were the days where live performance was the predominant component necessary for a visual representation of an artist's work.

The continuing evolution of music video content has of course inspired various scholars to make sense of how to analyze music videos. Carol Vernallis, a composer, musician, and music studies scholar, explicitly states that music videos "follow the song's form." She goes on to detail what the music videos "intend" to do and how they operate in terms of narrative exposition:

> If the intent of a music-video image lies in drawing attention to the music – whether to provide commentary upon it or simply to sell it – it makes sense that the image ought not to carry a story or plot in the way that a film might. Otherwise, videomakers would run the risk of our becoming so engaged with the actions of the characters or concerned with impending events that we are pulled to outside the realm of the video and become involved with other narrative possibilities. The song would recede into the background like film music. Music-video images gain from holding back information, confronting the view with ambiguous or unclear depictions – if there is story, it exists only in the dynamic relation between the song and the image as they unfold in time.[8]

Music videos stand as an excellent example of Justin Wyatt's definition of high concept in that they work in two ways: "through an emphasis on style within the films, and through an integration with marketing and merchandising."[9] Vernallis' points are valid in light of the high-concept nature of some of Propaganda's works. One of Propaganda's more elaborate productions, Dominic Sena's "Rhythm Nation" video for Janet Jackson, projects a diegetic mythos of a highly industrial and mechanical police state in which Jackson has a position of authority. She is adorned with military garb and dances in an authoritative and rigid manner in front of a group of fellow uniformed figures. Sena and Jackson do very little to tell us about this world. The viewer only encounters a moment of performance within this intricate setting. Though we can infer a larger world beyond the video, Sena and Jackson do not give any details about that world. At most, we can only guess that Jackson, being the pop star diva that she was during the videos release, is the central figure, conveying an authority of stylistic cool. In this sense, Vernallis' description of music video narrative is apt, as music videos can only "tell" so much, as she puts it, in light of performance and music.

However, must this depiction be subordinate to the pop song, as Carol Vernallis continuously implies? Can a visual image not become the driving force behind a music video or commercial text? Could these ideas work concurrently? Music videos during the late eighties implied a "changing ratio" in popular music cultures. As Lawrence Grossberg claimed in 1993, music videos acted as a metaphorical "billboard announcing a new media economy" where they are "located in a larger context in which visual media and images are competing with, if not displacing, music and aural images as the site of salvation and transcendence in rock culture."[10] Vernallis' statements directly indicate a form of "loss" when these visual components of popular music and commercialism come to fore. The music becomes lost in the crowded and brief audio-visual text of broadcasted

content. However, I contend that this process is additive. Even in the time when Elvis was gyrating his body on national television, few would deny the power and influence of a visual image accompanying popular music. These images begin to transcend music and seep into other forms of content, whether they are performance-based or cinematic. While Vernallis' discussions are an insightful example of how to begin to assess music videos formally, I contend that her perspectives are severely limiting as they place a hierarchy to the audial components of music video content. For Vernallis, the pop song is king with all other visual traits subservient to its control. As indicated in the previous chapter, Propaganda, record labels, and other retail industry companies saw potential in such promotion. Music videos were a way to garner popular music with new forms of *imagery*. Music videos were products in themselves, not just a means to support a song and its performer. While Vernallis' analysis proves useful to begin aesthetic discussions, I consider Propaganda's work on its own terms as a promotional cinematic text. The following analysis hopes to touch on how Propaganda's contribution, that of provocative style, contributed to this convergent content form.

As Propaganda's credibility as a high-quality production entity grew in the advertising industry, the company started taking on more advertising jobs as a means to increase financial growth. Television advertisements also earned more money than their music video counterparts. Though television advertisements were much shorter than music videos, their goals were quite similar: to present a product utilizing cinematic formal techniques for broadcast distribution. While music videos were a historically open site for filmmaking experimentation, television advertisements also held the same possibilities for cinematic expression. This process "entails the making and selling of immaterial things – feelings and affects, personalities and values – rather than goods."[11] The question then becomes whether Propaganda's style reflects the making and selling of

"immaterial things." If we are to suggest that "services" qualify as the immaterial, then Propaganda's self-promotion as a capable production house touches on the immaterial to some degree. However, the cultural "cool" of music video culture - the rock and roll and pop driven excess of a glamorous life filled with glamorous people – influenced its television advertisements. "I really concentrate on trying to make people look good," Sena said in an interview with Adweek about particular tenants of his filmmaking. "I know there are a lot of really imaginative agency people out there who are real innovators, the movers and shakers who dream of the great, great stuff. These are the people I'd love to work with…"[12] For Sena the lines between music videos and commercials were thin. Both could be a potential platform for experimentation.

In the following analysis of Propaganda's video's formal elements, these various content-forms all hold consistent forms of visual style. These styles exist "separate from, and excessive to, the apparent narrative," or lack there of, within these various texts. Though it may seem that style can be enough, Propaganda's music videos play into a larger industrial structure. Despite this inherent contextualization, supported in part by Propaganda's entering the feature film market in subsequent years, music videos and television advertisements are a component of American filmmaking, a new form of American cinematic tradition that continues to both influence new trends and reflect the period of their creation.

## ENGAGING PROPAGANDA FILMS' MODES OF STYLE

### Lighting

American feature filmmaking during the 1980s marked growing trends in cinematography, particularly that of chiaroscuro or high-contrast lighting. High contrast lighting has often been seen as an aspect of generic style, notably that of classic

Hollywood film noir. Film noir provided "a generic and visual touchstone" for content that "sought deliberately to differentiate themselves from a specific set of visual devices."[13] This high-contrast lighting style "opposes light and dark, hiding faces, rooms, urban landscapes in shadow and darkness which carry connotations of the mysterious and the unknown."[14] However, in the narrative feature-film, this high key lighting was often used to "hide motivations and true character" of individuals or to define a "psychological entrapment of [an urban environment's] in habitants."[15] These subjective tropes were influenced by German expressionism, where the internal became the external and both light and dark were both components of mental and physical states. Expressionist motifs function "as a kind of visual italics, supplying mood and texture and removing the stories from a merely bland, everyday context."[16] Peter Yates' *Eyewitness* (1981) and Win Wenders' *Hammett* (1981) were early examples of 1980s cinema harkening back to earlier days of black and white cinematography. Joseph Biroc, cinematographer on Wender's *Hammett,* cited this direct influence. "Actually the way I photograph is the way they photographed 40, 50, 60, 70, 80 years ago," said Biroc. The result was "a color film shot like a black and white film."[17]

Propaganda's filmmakers were inspired by vivid imagery that went beyond a "bland, everyday context."[18] Ridley Scott, whose film *Blade Runner* (1982, c. Jordan Cronenweth) created a neo-noir setting in dystopian future Los Angeles, influenced many Hollywood filmmakers during the period. *Blade Runner*'s influence absolutely informed Propaganda's projects, claims Nigel Dick:

> I think all of us basically were trying to remake *Blade Runner* over and over again. We had all seen it separately, and the DP who I worked with on *Welcome to the Jungle,* Vance Burbury – I worked with him for 30 years and I gave him his first DP job, he was obsessed with *Blade Runner*. We all were, you know. And so I would say every video that came out of Propaganda for the first five years was sort of a Blade Runner knockoff on some way or another.

According to Paul Ramaeker's account of lighting style during this period, this practice stemmed from the budgetary constraints of independent filmmaking, where the minimal financial demands of noir narratives became an encouraging factor for directors and producers to utilize the technique and produce stark images of a contemporary urban setting. [19] In other words, it was an economical means to portray vivid visuals.

While each video conveyed its own thematic elements, consistent high-contrast lighting stands in contrast to other forms of cinematic content.[20] Propaganda's contribution to this trend was in bringing this form of cinematography to short-form television, i.e. music videos and advertisements. This gave a distinct look of a form of content that often utilized high-key flat lighting (a product of multi-camera studio-based television productions). The chiaroscuro look of Propaganda's videos enabled them to stand out amongst the exponentially growing number of programs on cable television. This becomes especially important when considering channel surfing, where the decision of which channel to watch can be made in mere seconds of apprehending each channel's visual elements.[21] Such vivid high-contrast imagery encouraged viewers to participate and to look closely at an image.[22]

The influence of neo-noir is apparent in many of Propaganda's music videos, not only in lighting but also narrative. For example, Guns N' Roses' video for "Welcome to the Jungle" (1987, d. Nigel Dick) begins with lead singer Axl Rose exiting a bus at night on a dark and noisy city street. The blackness of the city, dappled with the artificial light from signs and passing cars, surrounds him as he walks toward the camera and into the shadows (Fig. 1). This brief intro to the thin narrative is almost immediately abandoned in favor of a more traditional live performance segment (Fig. 2) featuring the entire band. But the noir-ish lighting techniques persist in the performance shots, with shafts of light illuminating the band, while the eerily featureless audience – a sea of bobbing heads and

Figures 1 and 2: The dark noir-like intro to the "Welcome to the Jungle" video quickly transitions to a live performance, but the high contrast lighting remains consistent.

lifted hands – is shrouded in darkness. Of course these lighting techniques are reminiscent of those of a live concert, with spotlights illuminating the artist for the live audience. Beams of light were also a visual component of Ridley Scott's films *Blade Runner* and *Legend* (1985). *Legend* cinematographer Alex Thomson acknowledges that the use of high-contrast shaft lighting served no greater purpose than simple aesthetic appeal: "We had shafts of light that I sometimes had moving. Much of that was Ridley's idea, and it followed through from the thing he did in *Blade Runner* with searchlights that moved about for no good reason at all except they looked quite good."[23] While the use of noir-like imagery in "Welcome to the Jungle" reflects the themes within the song, with lyrics that directly relate urban environments to the light within them (*You can taste the bright lights/ but you wont get them for free)*, it also presents environments embedded with an exciting and intense sense of mystery. Lighting amplifies this mystery and conveys a visual style that supports intense heavy metal distortions, volume, and rhythms.

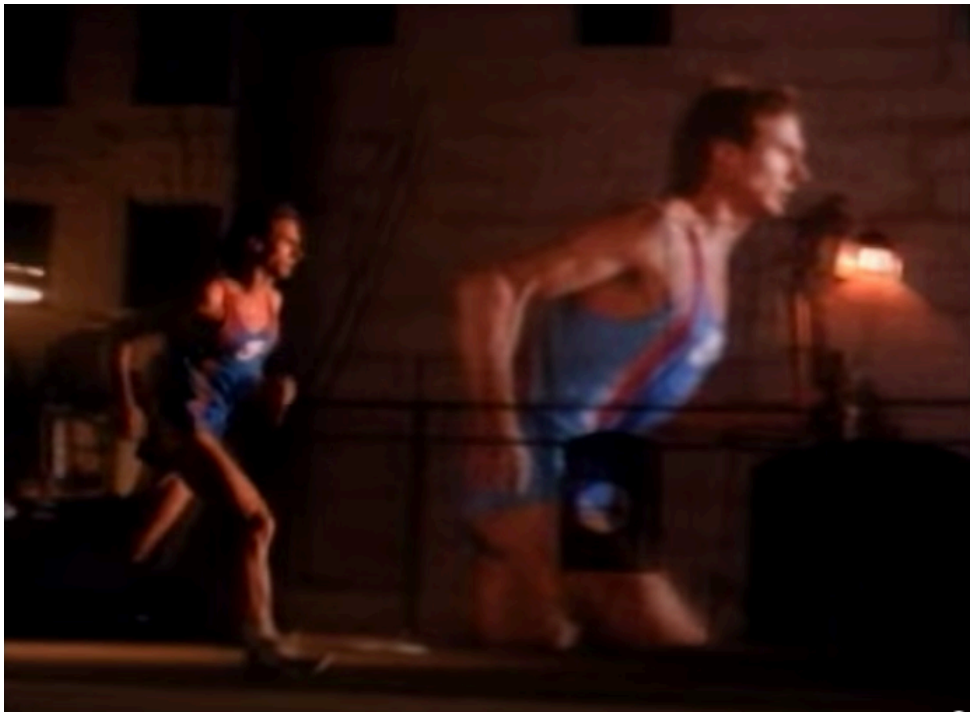
David Fincher's direction of Paula Abdul's video for "Straight Up" (1988) also utilizes high-contrast lighting but without a narrative framework. "Straight Up" deploys high-contrast monochromatic images that showcase Abdul's ability as a dancer and choreographer. There are sparse depictions of props (fences, street lights, signs), but Fincher displays them in an abstract space free from physical context. We get the sense that this environment could be an urban setting, but these perceptions are undermined by abstraction. With simple white and black backgrounds, the lighting becomes the predominant visual component that shapes Abdul's moving body, the bodies of her background dancers, and the inanimate objects. The influence of Scott's films is perhaps also evident here, especially in light of Dariusz Wolski's comment when he claimed, "David Fincher and I must have seen Ridley's film *Blade Runner* about 1,500 times."[24]

Figures 3 and 4. In David Fincher's "Straight Up," high contrast monochromatic lighting amplifies Abdul's body in motion.

Fincher and the "Straight Up" cinematographer Peter Smokler increase the contrast between light and dark dramatically. Though not typical of the traditions of feature filmmaking, the high-contrast imagery works in that it amplifies the shape of the moving body, highlighting Abdul's movements through the contrast of the monochromatic backgrounds of pure black and white. One moment, Abdul's shoulders and face sink into the blackness of the background (Fig. 3) Abdul becomes a figure in abstract with lighting, or lack thereof, providing compelling and kinetic depictions of her body in motion.

Dominic Sena's commercial for Nike, entitled "Nike Heritage" (dp. Rodney Dana), utilized depictions of a city streets at night. The diegetic lights of a nighttime cityscape serves as the man's primary source of illumination. Street sweepers (fig. 5), scaffolding lights, and street lamps highlight the shadowed runner as he makes his way through the city. Projected images of various sporting moments illuminate the building walls around him, conveying a sense of introspection and tradition the runner embodies in his otherwise mundane action of jogging. Projected light contributes to the thematic content and stands in contrast to the city's dark surroundings. The chiaroscurist mixture of darkness and light contributes to the sentiments of the spot, with the runner's isolation softened by the projected light of sports tradition and brand message. As the spot concludes, the runner is next to his own image projected on the wall behind him, creating a double visual of the man and his own "Nike heritage." "There is no finish line" is the campaign's message, as the man becomes a part of the tradition that surrounds him. While this particular spot stands as an obvious and high concept example of light's relation to brand language, it exemplifies how high contrast lighting itself could aid in the content's visual make-up and support thematic elements.

Many other Propaganda productions also utilized chiaroscuro lighting to great effect. All works in my sample contained chiaroscuro lighting. Works by Michael Bay



Figures 5 and 6. Rodney Dana's lighting for Dominic Sena's "Nike Heritage" commercial utilizes an urban setting to incorporate diegetic high-contrast lighting.

(Divinyl's "I Touch Myself," 1990) and Nigel Dick (Guns N' Roses' "Sweet Child O' Mine," 1987; Toto's "Pamela," 1988) also utilized stark monochromatic imagery – an exaggerated noir style where vivid whites are adjacent to empty blackness. Janet Jackson's video for the "Pleasure Principle" (1987, d. Dominic Sena) even begins with Jackson entering an empty warehouse-like studio apartment, another indication of noir urban settings, and turning on a few lights that do little to fill the vast expanse of her space. Nigel Dick's video for Toto's "Pamela" features brief depictions of the band shrouded in darkness against a white background, presenting them as featureless profiles. Again, the vividness of light and dark in Propaganda's cinematography become an intentional exaggeration of the already stark imagery indicative of the decade.

**Editing**

As briefly mentioned in chapter 1, Propaganda's editors had varying degrees of autonomy but plenty of opportunity to hone their craft and excellent production resources. Propaganda's three editing rooms were equipped with state-of-the art online editing systems that were often manned by a variety of editors, mostly freelance, throughout the day and night. "There was a pool of editors that were always in there," remembers frequent Propaganda editor Michael Heldman. "Generally speaking a day shift and a night shift so that they can get as much work done as possible. Sometimes we worked out of those rooms. Sometimes we rented some gear and worked out of [a director's] house actually. Some places had editing rooms we rented out so we often did that."[25] In the five or six days it took an editor to finalize a first cut for music videos or commercials, personal present for the editing process would vary from production to production. Some directors sat in on sessions and others allowed editors to cut content on their own without much oversight. "The process of editing, especially if you're not

actually doing it, is actually really boring to watch," admits Heldman. "Usually I would put something together and then get comments form the director."[26] Often directors would not be able to sit in with their editors because of a prolific production schedule, as Propaganda's filmmakers would often be occupied with other projects.

For music videos, an aspect of editing was to balance or vary the ratio between narrative or thematic content and performance. For example, Nigel Dick admits that his videos focus heavily on performance, while David Fincher's were often thematic. Rock bands such as Guns N' Roses often had rock shows interspersed with their highly thematic narrative elements. Pop stars had less traditional displays of performance, with concert-like displays of musical showmanship foregone in favor of high-concept Hollywood musical-inspired displays of singing and dancing. This balance could be easily determined in pre-production, where artists and directors often conceptualize the video's main themes. Editors would only be involved in pre-production and the production itself if the storyboards called for a special effect that would be done in post-production. Otherwise, many editors would not see footage until the processed film arrived in their editing suite. A day or two was usually needed to catalogue the footage, which directors usually left to the editors to manage.

In addition to the overarching balance between performance and narrative, music video editing also contained the seemingly miniscule decisions, such as when shots should occur and how long they should last. Editing, because of its inherent rhythmic and temporal makeup, has the closest relation to music. Often this relationship between audio and visual rhythm in music videos has been described as "MTV-style editing," referencing the medium's prominent platform. MTV-style editing simply describes edited content that cuts quickly in sync with music. In this sense, Vernallis' insistence of music leading visual style often holds true. "Because it can establish its own rhythmic profile,

the editing can provide a counterpoint to the song's rhythmic and timbral features, particular phrases in the lyrics, and especially the song's sectional divisions" and "provide a counterpoint to the song's rhythmic structures." However, Vernallis' observations then continue to generalize music video editing's role in visual construction: "the editing in a music video works hard to ensure that no single element (the narrative, the setting, the performance, the star, the lyrics, the song) gains the upper hand."[27]

Contrary to Vernallis' assumptions of music video editing creating a leveling sense of the varying attributes, Propaganda's videos often *imbalanced* these traits and created greater emphasis on particular parts of the video and pop star's persona. For example, David Fincher's video for George Michael's "Freedom! '90" greatly emphasizes the bodies of the video's multiple actresses and actors and cuts between them arbitrarily. The cuts are quick and as the models lip-synch to the track, edits would cut from one model to the other in mid-lyric. Close-ups of mouths and faces are often utilized, emphasizing lyrics over a mysteriously absent George Michael (save for his iconic leather jacket and guitar). Rhythmically the cuts come quickly during the first part of the verse (*I wont let you down…)* but then transition to rhythmic cutting on beat during the verse's second section (*I think there's something you should know…)*. The frantic cutting between images and actors occurs frequently throughout the video, whose average shot length is1.4 seconds.[28] The editing slows down slightly during the chorus (*All we have to do now*…), with the average shot length during the section being a half a second longer at 2 seconds (as opposed to 1.4 average during the verse). Later in the video, during an instrumental bridge, the editing speeds up considerably with fades to black coming between each brief shot. The cutting during this sequence correlates with the half note, occurring 2 times during a single beat. Also, images of exploding objects, a jukebox and guitar, occur roughly during crash cymbal hits during the chorus. At these moments,

the editing does follow the music but only briefly. The rhythmic correlation between image and song does not remain consistent throughout the entire video, only occurring in fitting and provocative moments. The varying visuals, aided by the lip-syncing supermodels (to be discussed in a following section), privilege the lyrics and imagery. Michael's vocal capabilities are showcased despite own image being left out entirely.

Dominic Sena's video for Taylor Dayne's "I'll Be Your Shelter" has its own imbalance between cutting styles. The first verse of the song contains crossfades between shots. The overlapping images lyrically flow into each other. However, the chorus' arrival ends the crossfading sequence and marks the beginning of the more traditional straight-cut technique. The straight cut's increased frequency give energy to the video. Though the overall shot length is about 1.8 seconds for the entire video, there is an imbalance between the first and second halves of the video. The first minute of video has an average shot length that is roughly (due to crossfading) 4 seconds while the last minute of the video's average shot length being 1.3 seconds. The song's tempo and rhythm remain consistent throughout, so the editing increases the song's *visual* rhythm, which correlates Dayne's loudening vocals and repeated gospel-like singing. Again, editing supports the music by giving it an added boost of visual energy.

Propaganda's television advertisements were more conventional. As I mentioned in the previous chapter, commercial projects would often take longer due to more involvement by corporate clients and their advertising agencies. This practice extended into the editing room, where advertising creatives would often sit with editors to ensure an appropriate handling of brand image. Some spots had very little cutting, such as one of David Fincher's ads for Colt 45 malt liquor starring Billy Dee Williams. The spot contains a 24-second shot of Williams speaking to the camera in his own apartment about the "power" of Colt 45. The camera repositions slightly as Williams moves towards the

middle of his apartment. The shot's single edit occurs at the end and merely cuts to a shot of the Colt 45 can with simple copy. Dominic Sena's "Nike Heritage" advertisement consists of straight cuts between runner and the surrounding city but also ignores the consistency of movement in frame. The runner, in various times throughout the ad, runs from left to right of the composition, from right to left, and from background to foreground. The traditional continuity of motion between shots is foregone in favor of the provocative images and lighting. The cuts are not motivated musically, but are a similar length to Propaganda's music video editing. In the full-uncut minute and 30-second version of the spot, the average shot length stands at 1.9 seconds. Propaganda's occasional utilization of music video editing in various commercials stands as the company's most notable visual component in defining a rock and roll inspired style for the advertising world. Ad Week heralded this influence by claiming Propaganda as a pioneer of "the flashy music-video-inspired commercial" which soon became the industry's standard.[29] Editing then stands as an example of visual style translating well to other content forms. That translation and influence on an industry further solidified Propaganda's hold on television advertising.

**Production Design**

Propaganda's production design often featured an elaborate urban or industrial setting, with homages to both noir and science fiction consistently incorporated into the space. Setting may be used to provide the audience a way in which to identify what genre a song or artist belongs to, in much the same way as an album cover, concert poster, or promotional portrait.[30] While the dark and steamy world of contemporary or futuristic urban life was often utilized as a physical framework for performance, the ideas within these generic realms – primarily those of sexuality, industrialization, and frustration with

Reagan-era conservatism - were conveyed through production design and allusions to filmmaking's own past. These worlds were often fantastic in nature and rarely correlated with real locales. These influences stem from Classical Hollywood film noir and German Expressionism, which created "urban worlds (on artificial sets) that were carefully contrived to contribute to a sense of mood and to enhance the emotional valence of films."[31] They were worlds shrouded in darkness and home to social strife and a political order that suppressed individualism and personal expression. Propaganda's videos often showcased the "suppressed," even if abstractly. The influence of German Expressionism and film noir are not just thematic but directly evident in the designs themselves.

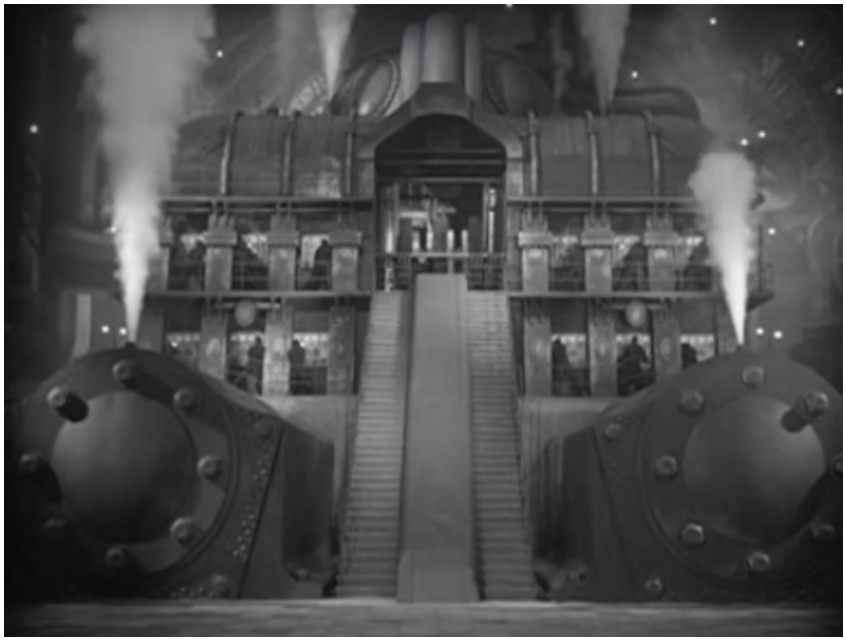
Dominic Sena's video for Janet Jackson's "Rhythm Nation" is one of Propaganda's more elaborate examples of an industrial fantastic world conveyed through production design. The video has an opening sequence before the song begins. An elevator clinks down from up high in a dark, wet, and smoky factory-like setting. A Janet Jackson voiceover hauntingly speaks over the image, describing a "colorblind" world (visually supported by black and white cinematography). When the camera finishes panning across bellowing pipes, dripping walls, and cranking gears, a young man looks up at the elevator and quickly runs down from his post amongst the massive machine. The music begins and Janet Jackson, dressed as a futuristic policewoman, begins an elaborately choreographed dance with more than a dozen dancers behind her. Surrounding them are pipes and the mechanisms of a giant machine. As the video progresses, Jackson and her troop of dancers are shown in other locations within the factory: dancing on a dark catwalk, plodding through a dark corridor, and enacting military-like drills on a giant service elevator. Ridley's Scott's influence is evident as beams of light pierce through the pipes and move arbitrarily in spotlight as if someone has just sounded an alarm. Jackson dances confidently in front of this intimidating group.

Her authority of performance and dance shines through the shadows. The young man from video's opening segment becomes a viewer himself, watching Jackson's performance from a distance – specifically through a chain-link screen –compelled by the motion and uniformity of Jackson and her dance crew. Jackson's dominance and authority in the video reflect her own pop star notoriety. "We're living in a very visual time right now," Jackson explained in 1990. "That's why videos are so important. Before, they really weren't. They play such an important part in the music business. The next is the live show. But the first they ever see of you is the video." [32] This awareness of music video's cultural importance is what led Jackson's producer Jimmy Jam to label her the "consummate video artist." [33]

Figure 5. In the Dominic Sena's "Rhythm Nation," Janet Jackson claims authority over the music video's dark and smoky dystopian world.

Madonna, another consummate video artist during this period, used similar themes of dystopian bleakness in her video for "Express Yourself" (1989, d. David Fincher). Inspired by Fritz Lang's silent science fiction epic, *Metropolis* (1927), "Express Yourself" depicts a world starkly divided between an "upper world of privilege and pleasure, and a lower one of unceasing toil." [34] The video features a bleak industrial society populated by muscular men as they pull levers a carry heavy metal beams across a factory floor. Madonna appears in contrast to this bleakness, portraying an almost angelic figure perched on the back of a large swan-shaped gargoyle. As the video begins, she is shown in an upper-class apartment, pacing about in front of a large window overlooking a grand city. The sets look artificial, obvious models and matte paintings. Intercut with Madonna's singing are images of the men hard at work in their grey environment. Finally, Madonna descends into the lower-realm of industry as she appears, dressed all in black, at the top of a set of stairs overlooking men pulling levers as steam billows around them (Fig. 7). The set design is simultaneously retro and modern, conveying a gothic monochromatic vision of an overbearing industrialized world. Much like Jackson's authority in her own class-divided society, Madonna also maintains control through her literal elevation above other actors and her ability to appear in multiple environments, both opulent and industrious. Again, the physical setting enhances the power of the pop star over an otherwise bleak and undesirable world. Madonna's body and glamour stand out amongst the monochromatic nature of her surroundings.

Propaganda's production design is not consistently reminiscent of genre cinema, as evidenced by Abdul's more abstract video for "Straight Up." David Bowie's video for "Day In, Day Out" (1987, d. Julian Temple), one of the company's earlier efforts in music videos, is a particularly elaborate example. Shot on location in Los Angeles, it shows Bowie frantically traversing through hotel hallways, city streets, and ransacked



Figures 6 and 7. David Fincher pays homage to Fritz Lang in Madonna's "Express Yourself" video. The set, a colorized and modern version of those in *Metropolis*, give Madonna power over others and elevates her pop star status.

convenience stores. Guns N' Roses' "Sweet Child O' Mine" (1987, d. Nigel Dick) uses the similar setting to that of "Welcome to the Jungle." The band simply performs their song live, but instead of in front of a fan-filled audience, it is in front of the music video production team and a small group of roadies, a much more intimate affair.

Fincher's television advertisement for YM magazine also features an abstract urban setting. A young Angelina Jolie walks across an empty blacktop as black destruction derby cars drive around her in an empty urban lot. Spray-painted with aspects of a young woman's life ("Guys," "Jobs," "College," "Friends," etc.), the cars careen around her and eventually smash into each other. While the urban design of the space is apparent, the commercial conveys space in a subjective matter. "It's her world," the title states over an image of Jolie's face, "We're just living in it." The phrase "her world" indicates this subjective if still ambiguous location, as if the space conveys a sense of calmness in the otherwise chaotic and violent coldness of urban life. Other Fincher spots utilize production design in a more straightforward manner, such as Billy Dee Williams' stylish yet relatable apartment in the Colt 45 television advertisements. In these spots, Williams' surroundings are a domestic and relatable depiction of modern life, a perfect locale to drink an equally comforting and "powerful" beverage. While not as high concept as Propaganda's other designs, the Colt 45 spot showcases a tableau of contemporary life that conveys functional and elegant modernity. It is "cool" to drink Colt 45, and you do not need to have celebrity status to do so, despite the spot's reliance on Williams. Both the YM and Colt 45 spots offer a more intimate and individualized approach to branding in a modern society. The actors are comfortable and confident in this urban environment, despite the vastly different designs of the physical spaces they inhabit.

Despite these latter examples differing from the grim and fantastic worlds of Jackson and Madonna's work, they still convey elements of modern urban life. Often recording artists are shown to be in control and comfortable in these spaces, whether it be Bowie's antics through a city or Guns N' Roses natural presence on a concert stage. These settings make the sonic tangible and support the power relations between pop stars and their admirers. For an artist like Madonna, this reflects own position as pop star diva, displaying her feminine authority over her fans, her music, her image, and media industries at large. Much like the movie star, the pop star becomes a master of his or her surroundings, real or imagined.

**Casting**

Much in the way that settings enable a musical artist to have authority over space and setting, casting - the selection of actors and dancers for a particular music video – enables authority through depictions of the human body. In their most fundamental description, music videos are often depictions of human bodies in action within a physical space. Such an intentionally generic description at least touches on a universality of filmed *entertainment* or the performance of an artist for entertainment purposes. "Record companies and video makers," Carol Vernallis states, "will try anything once, if only because novelty can break through the onslaught of commercial messages and grab the viewer's attention. Why, then, has there not been a video that makes it difficult to find the lead singer?" [35] Vernallis' question infers a universal practice of front men and women leading a music video through its narration. For pop stars, "the gamut of television devices available to television productions," costuming, props, locations, and interactions with actors," are "opened up to musicians in music video."[36] Musicians, particularly female musicians, have been quite adept at manipulating elements of visual

performances. Narratively, the lip-synching of lyrics while performing in a music video can act like an "omnipotent" presence to guide visual action.[37] For example, Taylor Dayne's video for "I'll Be Your Shelter" enacts the premise of the title, with her singing guiding a group of men to a shelter from a rainy dark night. She addresses the group of men and the audience simultaneously, guiding the straightforward narrative along to its grandiose musical conclusion.

Figure 8. Actress Betsy Lynn George is the star of Billy Idol's "Cradle of Love" music video. Propaganda's music videos often had pop stars in a diminished role in their own music videos, supporting the beautiful young actors and actresses at the forefront of narration.

Propaganda's music videos are notable in that they sometimes did not depict a pop star's appearance but the appearance of *other* individuals, often ones that are "beautiful" and "sexy." Pop stars, both men and women, are often amongst beautiful

people, such as Madonna's presence along side the muscle-bound men workers in the aforementioned "Express Yourself" video. Tina Turner's video for "I Don't Wanna Lose You" (1989, d. Dominic Sena), casts young actors as the predominant video figures, depicting a simple narrative of love gained and lost, with Tina Turner simply singing (narrating) over these images. Actress Betsy Lynn George (Fig. 8) is the focus of Billy Idol's "Cradle of Love" (1990, d. David Fincher) when she appears at a man's apartment (actor Joshua Townshend-Zellner) and seduces him to Idol's song. Idol only appears in inserts, simply singing to the camera in front a single-color background.

Figure 9. Models enact a particularly sexy depiction of fandom in George Michael's video of "Freedom! '90," listening to and singing along to a song they seem to know quite well.

George Michael did not even appear in his video for "Freedom! '90" (1990, d. David Fincher) and in his place are five female models (Naomi Campbell, Linda Evangelista, Tatjana Patitz, Christy Turlington, and Cindy Crawford) and four male models (John Pearson, Mario Sorrenti, Peter Formby, and Jean-Ange Chiappi) who lip-synch over Michael's vocals, embodying his presence with their own beauty and physique. [38] The video begins with George Michael's album *Listen Without Prejudice Vol. 1* (the album in which "Freedom '90" appears) playing on a stereo system. What follows are a series of dark, almost monochromatic images (again, high-contrast lighting sets a sullen and introspective mood) of the various models lip-synching along with the song. They wear scantily clad pajama-like clothing (Fig. 9) (in some instances no clothing at all) and enact a casual appreciation of the song similar to a pop music fan's own domestic practice of music listening. They listen, lip synch, and bob their head to the song while lounging on a couch, sipping a cup of coffee, taking a bath, working out, or smoking a cigarette. George Michael's presence in the video is relegated to intimate objects: the playing of his album (in itself a marketing of the record for potential buyers) and the symbolic burning of his well-known leather jacket and acoustic guitar. It is almost as if the depiction of pop star is being purposefully neglected and deconstructed.

These casting choices have an effect on gender dynamics within music video narratives. In a non-Propaganda music video, Cyndi Lauper's "Girls Just Want to Have Fun," wrestler Lou Albano lip-syncs to Lauper's playful vocals. Scholar Lisa A Lewis states that the "replacement of the father's scolding voice with the daughter's parodies and undermines the authority of the father, and by symbolic extension, patriarchy itself."[39] However, in "Freedom! '90," the gender roles are reversed with a variety of female models (and a couple male models) lip-synching to Michael's vocals. Thus, in the case of the female model's lip-synching, their presence is not undermined but rather

Figure 10. A model lip-syncs to George Michael's vocals, showcasing feminine beauty with a masculine voice.

given authority through a masculine voice. This authority is also apparent in light of a model's voice-less position in American culture, where women have no indication of personality or perspective beyond their physical appearance. They only need to *look* sexy, edgy, angelic, or whatever adjective is appropriate for their promotional image. Though these models are prominent in "Freedom! '90!" Michael's vocals give him narrative authority despite his visual absence.

Propaganda's commercials also utilized celebrity culture in the long tradition of advertising endorsements by some of the United State's well-known actors and music entertainers. One of Dominic Sena's first commercials for Propaganda, produced in 1988, involves diva Liza Minnelli promoting Estee Lauder's Metropolis cologne for men. As

Figure 11. Billy Dee Williams directly addresses the audience in David Fincher's commercial for Colt 45. The confidence and swagger of William's celebrity gives him an authoritative presence.

mentioned earlier, Billy Dee William's cool demeanor, obviously inspired by Lando Calrissian in *The Empire Strikes Back* (1980) and *Return of the Jedi* (1981), carries an otherwise straightforward uneventful malt-liquor ad. The spot's opening title card, "Billy Dee William's talks about Colt 45," is an apt description of what the act does - a direct message for a direct advertisement. Williams' confidence and swagger helped the spot earn three Clios, the period's most respected advertising award, including Best Director for David Fincher.[40] Even thought Angelina Jolie was not yet the A-list celebrity she would eventually become, her casting placed an element of feminine beauty within the otherwise bleak advertisement. However, this practice does not directly relate to

Propaganda but the advertising industry as a whole, where casting can often be a tedious process. "[Advertisers] all got something to say," Dick laments about the television ad production process. Often production meetings would include clients and advertising industry members saying things like "'You know, I think I've seen this guy, but I don't think he's right for our market. I want to go with the blonde guy.'" Nigel Dick emphasized this dynamic's frustration: "I'm like, 'Oh my God, these people...this is driving me insane.'" Meetings would often last for hours, much more than the casual and speedy pre-production meetings for music videos.

Propaganda's casting and use of models/actors often, as exemplified in "Freedom! '90" and "Cradle of Love," pushed the already notable presence of celebrity to the margins of their music video imagery. And celebrity endorsements in television advertisements easily fit the mold for trends at that time. Duran Duran's guitarist John Taylor's notion that "sometimes it's enough to just have style" rather than narrative holds true in Propaganda's auteur-lead utilization of glamor, especially in terms of casting. [41] Pop stars are not a necessary component for the deployment of visual style. A simple presence of sex and beauty can work wonders.

## CONVERGENT MEDIA, COMPLICATED TEXTS – FINAL THOUGHTS

As Propaganda's own name implies, commercial projects were a welcomed and accepted part of the company's development. Their later success with David Lynch and other Propaganda-produced feature film content would only solidify this transition away from promotional video focused organization that sought to utilize music videos and television advertisements as a means to further themselves and their aspirations. Of course the result of these changes were varied from person to person, and ultimately Propaganda's "magic" would run out. After Propaganda's closure in 2001, Advertising

Age labeled the company's closing as an unfortunate end to a progressive style of cinematic commercialism. The article was headlined "The Rise and Fall of Propaganda," giving the narrative a Shakespearian arc of success and inevitable tragedy.[42]

Propaganda's efforts in television advertising would greatly increase in the nineties, with directors such as Michael Bay, Mark Romanek, and Spike Jonze all contributing their talents to Propaganda's already well-received output. With this new crop of directors, Propaganda would continue to push the boundaries of music video production. Mark Romanek and Spike Jonze in particular would continue Propaganda's association with quality music video making. Jonze in particular would be called a "filmmaker ablaze with fresh ideas and fresh ways of filming them."[43] Right before Propaganda's sale in 2000, Steve Golin produced Jonze's first feature *Being John Malkovich* (1999). That movie would earn much acclaim from organizations like the Academy, who would nominate Jonze for the Best Director Oscar in 2000. Once, Propaganda was dissolved, Golin would found a new production company, Anonymous Content, which functioned much like Propaganda in that it produced music videos, television advertisements, and feature films all under one roof. One of those feature films, 2006's *Babel* (d. Alejandro González Iñárritu) would have Steve Golin nominated for his first Academy Award in the Best Picture category as producer. As recently as 2013, David Fincher harkened back to his early career and directed the music video for Justin Timberlake's "Suit and Tie." Of course, Steve Golin and Anonymous Content produced the video.

Music videos as a visual medium in the eighties stood as young art form, one that John Dahl admits many Hollywood filmmakers were trying to "figure out."[44] Must non-feature filmmaking always be placed within a Hollywood context? In other words, can they speak for themselves? Are these texts simply a visual extension of music, a visual

text whose sole purpose is support the audial text? Or are they a unique form of cinematic language, one that places conventions of film practice in the structures of popular music? To define music videos in these two last terms limits the perspective in which we can engage these works. Music video texts inherently encompass the convergence of a multitude of practices, industrial, cultural, and aesthetic. For Propaganda Films as a capitalistic entity, the collaborative effort to define a sense of cool style provided an aesthetic brand that promoted the company's services. An in-depth formal analysis of Propaganda's style inevitably leads to broader questions of music video and television advertising's place in American film history. Simplistically, their relation is apparent due to Propaganda's filmmaker's own success in later years within the Hollywood system. While some may be hesitant to call music videos "cinema," it is hard to deny the influence of cinematic practice on Propaganda's work and vice versa. My work places this practice within media history discourse, simultaneously complicating an already complex narrative and detailing the familiar yet new-look styles in which these textual forms operate.

This final chapter seeks to approach Propaganda's output formally - where visual components define a mode of style. Often such formal analysis comes with the assumption that an aesthetic and artistic process is at work within and around the text. This comes in spite of the obvious commercial forum in which such content is produced and distributed. Commercialism has its own negative connotations within the academy. Once a very tenured professor for an Art History course asked a student presenting on music video's aesthetic components if music videos "Were ever more than an advertisement?" and "Have progressed at all in twenty years?" If this was that scholar's perspectives on music video content, I could only infer how the scholar felt about television advertisements and other promotional material. While such dismissive

comments may not be shared in a contemporary media studies department, still very little of this content form has been acknowledged in academic scholarship up to this point. In essence, my work on MTV, Propaganda, and the convergent media culture of the 1980s is an attempt to bring some validity to these discussions and meld new content forms (new for the academy, at least) with the tenets of media studies.

Of course, this attempt itself raises its own questions. Should an analysis of commercial work be placed within this framework? Must we develop a language to think of Propaganda's work on its own terms? My use of interviews is an attempt to discern Propaganda's own perspectives of the media world at large. I can only hope that fellow scholars will pursue such inquiries further. As with any scholastic enterprise, only years of continuous research would prove any relevance. Propaganda stands as but one example of a diversified mediascape. Other companies and organizations are of course a part of this landscape. Further analysis and historicizing may help broaden our perspectives on the American media experience and provide more insight beyond subject matter that has already been greatly privileged. I can only hope that my efforts have been a contribution to such aspirations.

*Chapter 3 Endnotes*

[1] Richard Gold, "'Flashdance' Film, LP Feeding Off Each Other," *Variety,* 11 May 1983, 3.

[2] Gold, "H'wood Majors Spinoff Videos, "108

[3] Stephen Prince, *A New Pot of Gold: Hollywood Under the Electronic Rainbow, 1980 to 1989* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2000), 133

[4] Andrew Goodwin and Lawrence Grossberg, *Sight and Vision's Music Video Reader,* (Routledge, 1993), ix

[5] Roland Marchand, *Advertising the American Dream, Making Way for Modernity, 1920 to 1940,* (Berkely: University of California Press, 1985), 9.

[6] Ibid., ebbok.

[7] Quoted in Jim Hana, "The Rise and Fall of Propaganda," *Ad Age,* December 1, 2001, Accessed March 10, 2015, <http://adage.com/article/beat-sheet/rise-fall-propaganda/92280/>

[8] Carol Vernallis, *Experiencing music video: Aesthetics and cultural context*, (New York City; Columbia Press, 2004), 3-4

[9] Ibid., 24

[10] Lawrence Grossberg, "Cinema, Postmodernity, and Authenticity," in *Sound and Vision: The Music Video Reader,* ed. Simon Frith et al, (New York City; Routledge, 1993), 184

[11] Sarah Benet-Wiser, *Authentic: the politics of ambivalence in a brand culture,* (New York City; New York University Press, 2012), 7

[12] Quoted in Karen Singer, "The Hottest New Directors; Nine up-and-coming talents who are piquing agencies' interest," *Adweek*, October 19, 1987

[13] Paul Ramaeker, "The New Hollywood," in *Cinematography*, ed. Patrick Keating. (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 2014)

[14] Janey Place and Lowell Peterson, "Some Visual Motifs of *Film Noir,*" *Film Noir Reader,* (New York City: Limelight Editions, 1996), 66.

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[17] Quoted in Richard Patterson, "Classic Lighting for *Hammett*," *American Cinematographer,* November 1982, 1168.

[18] Glenn Erickson, "Expressionist Doom in *Night and the City,*" *Film Noir Reader,* (New York City: Limelight Editions, 1996), 206.

[19] Paul Ramaeker, "The New Hollywood," in *Cinematography*, ed. Patrick Keating. (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 2014)

[20] Quoted in "Portrait of a Producer: STEVE GOLIN Anonymous Content/Propaganda Films," Youtube video, posted by Association des Producteurs de Cinema, June 27, 2013, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=9Yx5oPfuNMg

[21] Raymond Williams, *Television – Technology and Cultural Forum,* (London: Routledge, 2003)

[22] Benjamin Bergery, "Reflections 11: Elmes." *American Cinematographer,* February 1991, 68.

[23] Ron Magid, *"Labyrinth* and *Legend*: Big Screen Fairy Tales," *American Cinematographer,* August 1986, 67.

[24] Chris Pizzello, "Bedlam on the Basepaths: Filming *The Fan,*" *American Cinematographer,* September 1986, 54.

[25] Michael Heldman (Propaganda editor) in discussion with the author, March 2015

[26] Ibid., interview

[27] Carol Vernallis, *Experiencing music video: Aesthetics and cultural context*, (New York City; Columbia Press, 2004), 27

[28] Compare this to the average shot length of films during this period, which Bordwell states as being 4 to 6 seconds in his work *The Way Hollywood Tells It*.

[29] Richard Linnett, "Creative Focus: Future Shock," *AdWeek,* October 18th, 1999, accessed March 11, 2015, < http://www.adweek.com/news/advertising/creative-focus-future-shock-46726>

[30] Ibid.

[31] Stuart C. Aitken and Leo Zonn, *Place, Power, Situation, and Spectacle: A Geography of Film,* (Lanham: Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, 1994), 120.

[32] Quoted in *British Vogue,* 1990, 578

[33] Jefferson Graham, "Janet in command; Jackson rules her own 'Nation'; Highlights of a rhythmic life," *USA TODAY*, December 15, 1989, 1D.

[34] Saul Austerlitz. *Money for Nothing: A History of the Music Video from the Beatles to the White Stripes*, (New York City: Continuum, 2007)

[35] Carol Vernallis, *Experiencing music video: Aesthetics and cultural context*, (New York City; Columbia Press, 2004), 54.

[36] Lisa A. Lewis, "Emergence of Female Address on MTV," in *Sound and Vision: The Music Video Reader,* ed. Andrew Goodwin and Lawrence Grossberg, Lo(ndon: Routledge), 132.

[37] Ibid., 131

[38] The five female models, all at the height of their careers, appeared on the cover of British *Vogue* in January 1990.

[39] Lisa A. Lewis, "Emergence of Female Address on MTV," in *Sound and Vision: The Music Video Reader,* ed. Simon Frith et al, (New York City; Routledge, 1993), 131.

[40] Richard Linnett, "Creative Focus: Future Shock," *AdWeek,* October 18th, 1999, accessed March 11, 2015, < http://www.adweek.com/news/advertising/creative-focus-future-shock-46726>

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[42] Jim Hana, "The Rise and Fall of Propaganda," *Ad Age,* December 1, 2001, Accessed March 12, 2015, <http://adage.com/article/beat-sheet/rise-fall-propaganda/92280/>

[43] "Director Series, Vol. 1 – The Work of Director Spike Jonze," Amazon.com, Accessed April 30, 2015, < http://www.amazon.com/Directors-Series-Vol-Director-Spike/dp/B0000AZT2X>

[44] Quoted in "Portrait of a Producer: STEVE GOLIN Anonymous Content/Propaganda Films," Youtube video, posted by Association des Producteurs de Cinema, June 27, 2013, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=9Yx5oPfuNMg

# Appendix

***Propaganda Sample***

| YEAR | SONG TITLE/AD TITLE | ARTIST/CLIENT | DIRECTOR |
|---|---|---|---|
| 1987 | "Day In, Day Out" | David Bowie | Julian Temple |
| 1987 | "Welcome to the Jungle" | Guns n Roses | Nigel Dick |
| 1987 | "Victim of Love" | Bryan Adams | Dominic Sena |
| 1987 | "Pleasure Principle" | Janet Jackson | Dominic Sena |
| 1988 | "Pamela" | Toto | Nigel Dick |
| 1988 | "Sweet Child of Mine" | Guns n Roses | Nigel Dick |
| 1988 | "Billy Dee Williams Talks About Colt 45" | Colt 45 | David Fincher |
| 1988 | "Straight Up" | Paula Abdul | David Fincher |
| 1988 | "Metropolis" | Estee Lauder | Dominic Sena |
| 1989 | "O Father" | Madonna | David Fincher |
| 1989 | "Express Yourself" | Madonna | David Fincher |
| 1989 | "I Don't Want to Lose You" | Tina Turner | Dominic Sena |
| 1990 | "Rhythm Nation" | Janet Jackson | Dominic Sena |
| 1990 | "I'll Be Your Shelter" | Taylor Dayne | Dominic Sena |
| 1991 | "Freedom! '90" | George Michael | David Fincher |
| 1991 | "I Touch Myself" | DiVinyls | Michael Bay |
| 1991 | "Cradle of Love" | Billy Idol | David Fincher |
| 1991 | "Nike Heritage" | Nike | Dominic Sena |
| 1991 | "It's Her World" | YM Magazine | David Fincher |

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